

October Hill 
MAGAZINE



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VOLUME 6, ISSUE 4

October Hill

M A G A Z I N E 

Volume 6, Issue 4

The new year ushers in change. We at *October Hill Magazine* are very excited to announce several important changes and additions to our staff.

Hannah Robinson has taken charge as Managing Editor. Hannah, who has a love of short stories and poetry and a degree in Publications, has worked as an editor and writer for many years. She is excited to join the OHM team. She replaces Samantha Morley, the first Managing Editor of OHM, who resigned to pursue other interests. In five plus years at OHM, Samantha was instrumental in developing a new submissions system and a redesign of the magazine. We are very grateful for Samantha's efforts and service. We wish her well.

OHM is excited to announce that Lee Tury has joined us as Short Story Editor. Lee has a BFA in Creative Writing with a specialization in Poetry from George Mason University. Lee currently works as an associate editor at an academic publisher and writes poetry in her spare time. She will manage in the role formerly held by Selin Tekgurler, our first Short Story Editor, who is now a book editor at a major book publisher in New York. We wish to thank Selin for her four years of fine work on OHM, in which she worked with short story authors to raise their work to a level suitable for publication. We wish Selin well. Lee will manage Orion Emerick, a fiction writer and a fan of magical realism, who has a passion for short stories. Orion worked for their undergraduate program's literary magazine, *Prairie Margins*, and fell in love with every aspect of the literary journal process. Michael Perry McBroom has also joined us as assistant short story editor. Michael earned his MFA in creative writing from Full Sail University, where he received honors for editing screenplays and short stories. He's worked on set, editing short films, and hopes to see his own works for television and movies produced.

OHM will have a new Poetry Editor, Leyna Bohning. Leyna received her Master's in Creative Writing from the North-East Ohio MFA program. During that time, she worked as a managing editor at the Cleveland State University Poetry Center, publishing books of poetry and nonfiction. Poetry has been a strong growth area for OHM. Leyna brings a strong, experienced hand to her work.

We have reinforced our poetry staff with the addition of Claire Wilgus and Kimi Canete. They join Clare Kernie, who has made outstanding contributions to our magazine for two years. Kimi is working toward a Bachelor of Arts in English and American Literature at New York University. Claire is working toward a Bachelors in English Literature at NYU.

OHM is pleased to announce that Abigail Hebert has joined us as a book reviewer on the poetry staff. Abigail earned a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and French and Francophone Studies at Vassar College in 2020. She works as a literary scout. Her first poetry book review appears in this issue.

Marie Bogdanoff has also joined October Hill as a proofreader. She will graduate from New York University in May 2023, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and American Literature.

Richard Merli *Editorial Director*

Hannah Robinson *Managing Editor*

Meet the Staff



EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Richard Merli

MANAGING EDITOR

Hannah Robinson

POETRY EDITOR

Leyna Bohning

SHORT STORY EDITOR

Lee Tury

ASSISTANT POETRY EDITORS

Clare Kernie
Claire Wilgus
Kimi Canete

ASSISTANT SHORT STORY EDITORS

Michael Perry McBroom
Orion Emerick

BOOK REVIEWERS

Julia Romero
Abigail Hebert

PROOFREADER

Marie Bogdanoff

Interested in joining the team?

We're always looking for editors and coordinators.
Submit your resume and cover letter to
OctoberHillMag@gmail.com

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**Short
Stories**

Whys and Wherefores

By: William Cass

William Cass has had over 285 short stories appear in literary magazines and anthologies. He's been a Best Small Fictions, Best of the Net, and four-time Pushcart nominee. His first short story collection was published by *Wising Up Press* in 2020, and a second will be released in early 2023.

Luis had been a patient of mine for less than a year. He'd been referred to me by his primary care physician on the south side of San Diego. He didn't really require my care as an internist anymore. Spikes in his cholesterol levels and some unusual side effects involving his statin drugs had led to the referral, but those had been quickly remedied after the med adjustments I made and a few subsequent office visits. Additionally, he'd also followed my advice about exercising more regularly and losing weight, which had contributed to his improved condition. I'd kept on seeing him for routine check-ups, but knew he no longer needed my services. The truth was, I liked him and his quiet, appreciative, positive manner after so many other encounters to the contrary. He called me "Doc" and appeared to enjoy coming to see me. So, I hadn't yet formally discontinued our association, although that was something I'd made up my mind I had to do.

I shared the second floor of a medical building and its waiting room with several other doctors of internal medicine and related specialties. Our offices ringed the waiting room on three walls, each with plastic windows, behind which our receptionists worked. It was my practice to come into the waiting area myself to greet my patients and bring them back for their appointments, something of an oddity, I guess, which I'd borrowed from a kindly older mentor of mine with whom I'd done part of my residency. It was in that waiting area that I saw Luis and James Pernell at the same time. Luis had come quite early, as was his custom, and sat flipping through a magazine, while James slouched across from him next to his mother wearing his tattered ball cap, cell phone in hand like usual, tapping his foot to whatever music blared that afternoon from his earbuds. At the sight of the young man, I resisted an urge to scowl. James had briefly been a patient of mine as well. But when his condition

began to warrant it, I'd referred him to a nephrologist colleague of mine whose office was on the opposite side of the waiting area. James' mother must have had him quite late in life, because her hair was almost completely white and she already used a cane. My next patient, a well-dressed woman about her same age, rose from her seat without even waiting for me to acknowledge her and followed me back to one of my exam rooms.

A couple of patients later, I returned and greeted Luis. Like always, he smiled and shook my hand warmly in both of his. He couldn't have been sixty years old, yet his mahogany skin had a leathery quality to it, which reminded me of the old recliner I had at home, and his grasp was just as comforting. His eyes were downturned at the outside edges and a little moist, giving them a tender, gentle quality.

Our appointment followed its typical, quick pattern. I reviewed his recent lab results on my laptop, while Luis inquired about my own health and how my wife and young son were doing; he'd remarked on their identical red hair in the photo on my office desk during our initial consultation and never failed to ask about them. As I completed his check-up, he told me with some delight about a woman he'd met beforehand in line downstairs at the pharmacy whose parents, like his, had crossed over the border from the same rural area of Mexico many years ago to pick crops in the Imperial Valley.

"What are the chances?" he asked, shaking his head with his quiet smile.

"Pretty amazing," I said and shook my own in agreement.

I confirmed with him that there had been no changes

in his medical status, made a few entries to his chart on my computer, and once again saw no need to make any adjustments to his medications beyond reviewing their dosages with him. He nodded thoughtfully to everything I said. As I readied myself to finally explain to him about not needing to see me anymore, he tilted his head, frowned, and said: “Doc, there’s something I think I’d like to do. But I could use your help with it.”

“That so?”

“Yes, I believe it is.”

I swiveled on my stool to face him more fully and told him, “All right. Shoot.”

He rubbed his chin a few times before saying: “Well, there was this young man sitting across from me in your waiting room a little while ago. I’m pretty sure it was his mother with him. So, anyway, I watched him use this kit and prick her finger, I guess to check her glucose levels. I figured she has diabetes. I watched the way he was with her, you know, how slow and careful.”

He paused then and looked at me with those eyes. My heart fell a little. The tip of a cypress tree branch outside scratched against the exam room window on the spring breeze.

“So, anyway,” he continued, “the waiting room wasn’t very crowded, and I could hear them talking after he finished doing that with her about the appointment he was waiting for with...” Luis grimaced slightly. “His neffer...”

“His nephrologist,” I finished for him. “She’s a colleague of mine.”

“Okay, fine. And after you came into the waiting room, he mentioned about having been a patient of yours.”

Although it was probably a HIPAA violation, I found myself nodding without further consideration.

Luis’s eyes brightened.

“Well, that’s good,” he said. “So, anyway, the two of them were talking about his appointment with your colleague, his mother and him, and it seems that the young man is needing a kidney transplant. Anyway, that’s what he said. And they looked pretty glum about things. They talked about him being on some

sort of long waiting list.”

I couldn’t do anything but nod. The need he described wasn’t a surprise; it’s frankly what I’d been expecting when I’d referred James to her.

“So, anyway,” Luis said. He rubbed his chin some more. “I think I’d like to do that. Give him one of mine.”

I felt my eyebrows knit.

“Do you mean becoming a living donor?” I asked. “Donate one of your own kidneys to him?”

Luis’s nod was slight but clear.

“I do, yes,” he said.

I sat and stared at him. I realized I didn’t know much about Luis beyond the few things he’d told me or were in his record. I knew he had always been single and worked as a night custodian at an elementary school. I knew that he liked woodworking. My knowledge about James was only slightly more extensive, but it was plenty. I’d seen the “Put America First” bumper sticker on his pick-up truck. And I could still remember the shock and disgust I’d felt when I recognized him in television news footage shouting angrily and shaking a “Build the Wall” placard at an anti-immigrant rally in Phoenix the previous summer.

Luis returned my gaze, nodding slowly.

“Other than my cholesterol thing,” he said, “which you’ve got fixed okay now, I’m in pretty good health, so I figure I might be a fit enough donor candidate. I live alone, and don’t have any family counting on me. I’ve read that a person can function just fine with one kidney. So...” He shrugged, pursed his lips. “And then I found myself thinking about when I was about the same age as that young man, living with my mom and helping her with her medical problems.” He chuckled, his eyes glinting at the memory. “And believe me, she had a few.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just sat there looking at him. He was still perched on the edge of the exam table. The space was small enough that our knees almost touched. A kind of numbness crept over me as my mind toggled back and forth between Luis and James Pernell.

“So,” Luis said. “I was hoping you could tell me how

to go about pursuing that. Maybe you could talk to your colleague, see if that young man and I match up right. You know my blood type, probably have his, whatever else you need. See if that's something that could get done."

"There's a lot involved," I heard myself blurting. "Tests beforehand, insurance considerations, possible side effects afterward..."

"All that's fine." Luis held up his hand to cut me off. "Just hoping you can get the process started, Doc. I can take it from there."

I studied him, blew out a breath, and said, "What you're suggesting is pretty extraordinary. For someone who's a complete stranger to you."

"Not complete," Luis replied. His voice had softened. "We shared that waiting room. I heard them talk, know that young man has this challenge, this considerable challenge, and that I can maybe help." He paused again. "So, what do you say, Doc? Can you talk to that colleague of yours, and get the ball rolling?"

I knew I could. She and I had already spoken about James Pernel. She knew about his political inclinations, too; she'd told me he'd come right out and all but bragged to her about them. She was as appalled with him as I was. But, of course, those weren't anything I could ethically share with Luis; HIPAA regulations were absolutely clear about that. I pursed my lips, met his moist-eyed gaze, and nodded.

"Okay, then." He slid off the edge of the exam table and offered his hands. I folded them into my own and we shook. He smiled and said, "Pass on whatever information about me to her that you need to. You know how to get a hold of me."

"I do."

"All right, then. Thanks."

And just like that, he was out the exam room door and gone. The doorway stood agape, and I sat staring at its emptiness for several long moments. I hadn't said a thing to him about him not needing to see me anymore. Instead, he'd had ideas of his own to discuss, decisions he'd made in a very short time that were beyond my understanding. I looked out the window to the parking lot below and watched Luis walk across it and climb in his car, an old sedan missing one hubcap. He backed up carefully and drove away. Almost immediately afterward, James Pernel led his

mother on her cane out to his pick-up truck a few spaces away. It had a raised suspension, and he had to help her up into it. A few moments later, it roared off, too, exhaust billowing up over his bumper sticker.

Then the parking lot sat still and motionless in the early afternoon's clean, white light. I was vaguely aware of muffled voices from my staff in the hallway. I had other patients waiting for me, but I stayed where I was, thinking. Out in the hall, one of my staff laughed quietly, and another answered in kind. The cypress branch scratched lightly at the window. Finally, I shook my head, forced myself to my feet, and prepared as best I could to go about the rest of my day.





The Champ, The Other, and The Sultry Temptress that Ails Us All

By: Michael Tyler

Michael Tyler writes from a shack overlooking the ocean just south of the edge of the world. He has been published in several literary magazines and plans a short story collection sometime before the Andromeda Galaxy collides with ours.

1974 Zaire

Muhammad Ali has not been World Champion for four long years. The only two men to whom he has ever lost are Joe Frazier and Ken Norton.

George Foreman is undefeated. He destroyed Champion Joe Frazier in two rounds and then decimated Ken Norton in two rounds.

Tonight Ali challenges Foreman.

Journalists and Soothsayers have gathered from all four corners of the world to watch young Foreman murder old Ali in the only place in the world where murder remains legal, the four corners of a boxing ring...

And goddamn it, it's four a.m. in this godforsaken jungle of a nation, and I find myself seated directly ringside to watch two imposing forces collide.

It will be hot, even at four am in this beast of a jungle environment, and I am here to pay witness to the Champ who became the Martyr and now simply, the Other.

The Champ will beat the Other, but the Other is not a man to go down, and so I and all within this hastily converted soccer stadium are sat as at a wake to a great God who is about to be publicly bludgeoned to death.

Beer.

More beer.

And the weed, of course. It's practically free here in the jungle.

Yes, the insight of a marijuana high in combination with the depressant of alcohol is the perfect combination for the ensuing execution. I will be both insightful and yet dulled to what I must perceive.

The Other walks out. He is old. He was once great. Now he is simply an old man who was once great. He walks to the squared circle.

The Champ jogs out, literally running to this massacre, and there is an air all around that we shall tonight witness a Christian torn by a lion, and we will weep, and we will wail, and worst of all I shall profit as I am that most duplicitous of man.

I am, I am ashamed to admit, a journalist.

The anthem plays. The Other looks calm. The Champ looks angry. And big. Good God, he is big. They meet in the center of the ring as the referee announces rules that all boxers have known since childhood.

What is really happening here, however, is that a psychological battle has begun. The referee is simple misdirection to distract all from the real battle going on as the Other talks to the Champ. Talks to him as if the Champ were a boy coming home with milk but no change and chocolate stains to eager lips.

The Champ looks angry. No. Not angry. Stoic. The Champ looks stoic. There is beef to be beaten, and he is ready to play butcher this night.

The bell.

The Other runs to the middle of the ring as if to say, “Man I ain’t scared of nobody!” The Champ takes his time to march to center ring. The Other and the Champ dance, as if each holds a code and neither wants to be the first to reveal the key.

The Other turns confessor first with a stiff right to the face of the Champ.

A straight right.

You do not hit a boxer with a straight right.

You certainly do not hit a boxer with a straight right in the first round.

You most definitely do not hit the Champ with a straight right in the first round.

And yet lo, there is another . . . and another . . . five in total. Five declarations that scream, “I defy fear and, yes, I am weaker, but I have fleet and glory on my side!”

The Champ is annoyed. It is as if he has returned home to find his wife has burnt the evening roast. He is not hurt so much as offended.

Personally.

The Champ is personally offended.

The round ends.

The Champ sulks to his corner, the Other jogs to his.

And yet the Other is scared. The Other has laid claim to the center of the ring and all but cried out, “I am man! I shall not be moved. I shall stand and strike!” And yet the Champ has answered with simple disconcertion amid waived disdain.

The bell rings. The men meet in the middle, but there will be no more straight rights. This served as a statement in the opening round and there is no need to risk a repeat—the statement has been delivered. If not, there is no use for repetition.

No, this fight will not be won via dogma.

The Other throws his left. The Other circles. The Other runs. The Other punches. The Other runs as he punches. We are now on a steady and well known

shore as observers, this is how the combat will play out.

The Champ does not just throw punches in return. No, the Champ wails, wails, simply wails from far, far back into the dark history of his angst. And the Champ connects.

And connects again.

And again.

Alas, the butchery will go ahead per schedule.

The Other accepts the beating. Beat. Beat. Beat. The Champ beats again and again and again and the Other simply offers a stern reproach, as though this child has stolen a nickel and his father knows of its import.

The bell rings. The Champ beats the Other.

The bell rings. The Champ beats the Other.

The bell rings. The Champ beats the Other.

I reach for my fourth beer with a hand less than steady.

The bell rings . . . the bell rings . . . and yet what is this? The Other has struck the Champ and struck him as punishment for his vice.

Faces in the crowd turn, and eyes widen. Whatever there is, there is certainly a *something* to the air, uninvited to the party, arrival late perhaps but the arrival of the *something* has certainly not failed to turn heads and wrinkle men’s minds.

The Champ and the Other meet in the middle once more. The Other begins to talk, soliloquy is offered to the Champ as the Other lands jab, hook, and straight right to the face.

The Champ is drunk, the Champ is confused, the Champ knows he has borne witness to the arrival of the *something*.

The bell rings.

The Champ and the Other meet in the middle once more.

The Other talks once more. Talks to the Champ as he

lands jab, hook and straight right to the face.

The Champ is drunk, the Champ is confused, the Champ knows there lies the *something*, of that only is he certain.

But the *something* is an unknown.

The *something* is an unknown to the Champ, and the Champ feels shame. Shame and rage at its most atavistic. He has been shamed, and that is a hard lolly to lick.

The Other talks.

Talks.

Talks some more.

Each with a punch.

“You ain’t nothing!”

Punch!

“You a sissy!”

Punch!

“You will receive your contrition even if you are forced to swallow.”

Punch!

“You *will* receive your contrition!”

Punch!

The fight is over.

The fight is over.

The Other is God once more, and the Champ is prostrate. The Champ is prostrate toward the Other. The Other is God and earned the prostration of the Champ.

The crowd’s cheers turn to tears as I join in welcome resurrection.





Our Time, Interrupted

By: Elizabeth Laughlin

Elizabeth Laughlin is a doctoral student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where she is a graduate assistant. Her work has been published online by *Tube City Media*, *NASSR*, and *Indiana University of Pennsylvania*. Her short story, “Twenty-Seven,” has been published by *Modern Language Studies*.

“You give me hope.”

That’s what you said to me. We were sitting in a dive bar, the Packers on the flat screen. Outside, snow belted from all angles. But in here, we were safe. We were warm.

I smiled.

“Me? No way,” I said. My attempt at modesty urged you to fill in the gaps.

In your eyes, I saw a woman who was sure of herself, who took risks. It inspired me to do better. To be better.

“Just the way you are,” you said. “It makes me excited. It excites me.”

I shot you a suggestive look. But you slapped me away, laughing.

“Get out of here,” you said, still smiling. You were enjoying this—and wanted to hold onto it. The essence of our time together. Our time, interrupted.

“I don’t know what it is,” you went on, “but you make me excited for tomorrow.”

As a writer, I clung onto these words. I would recall them later as I sat at my desk, the pen dancing across the paper, never forgetting the way you looked at me.

“I don’t want us to live without each other,” you said, fighting back tears.

Breaking the distance between us, I reached for you.

“Hey, don’t talk like that,” I said. “Why are you talking like that?”

“Because,” you said. “It’s all hitting me now. How quickly this can be taken away.” You gestured to the space around us, which was filled with commotion and energy.

I cracked a smile.

“You know Joe’s never closing shop,” I said.

Joe, the owner and lone bartender, had known us since high school. In fact, we had all sat together at lunch, three kids who were misguided, maybe even misunderstood. Years later, our paths would cross again. Call it fate. Call it serendipity. Whatever you call it, it happened.

In my fifties, with one marriage under my belt, I decided to ask you out. “Like, to get a drink,” I said for clarification. The heat crept up my neck.

“I thought you’d never ask,” you said.

We were both blushing, unsure of where things were headed.

Every Saturday—and the occasional Sunday—we hung out in that old dive bar. So did others our age, who were far more jaded and cynical than we were.

“Let’s never be like them,” you said.

And by that, you meant—let’s never succumb to misery. Let’s never lose sight of the magic, the thrill of being alive. Even when things get tough. Especially when.

From that moment, we made a pact—to be our best selves. I often slipped up, but you forgave me. That was the cycle of our relationship.

As the Packers played the Broncos in the playoff game, I had the sense that something was wrong. Terribly wrong. I wasn't sure how I missed it.

"Sherrie," I said.

My stomach clenched.

Your eyes—the beautiful emerald ones—brimmed with tears. I had the sense that I would remember this moment for the rest of my life.

"I have cancer," you said.

The air, which felt comfortable, turned cold and vile. At once, a whooshing sound filled my ears and distorted my sense of reality, my understanding of things as they were, as they had always been—

"No," I said, as if it were that simple.

A sobbing sound escaped from your throat. But the music kept playing, unbothered. College girls laughed and guffawed at one another; newlyweds, kissing, stopped to take a picture; an elderly man bowed his head and prayed at the bar, his eyes glued to the TV.

Meanwhile, my life was ripped open.

You took my hands.

"I love you so much, Dan," you said, as if it were about me. As if I were the one with seven months left to live.

Before reality set in, I said, "Let's get out of here."

We rushed out, hand in hand, shivering against the February wind. Nearby, a homeless man sat in the alley, his eyes bleak and downtrodden.

Without hesitation, I handed him a twenty.

"Get yourself something good to eat," I said. But my eyes never met his as my mind swam with agonizing thoughts.

When we reached my yellow Toyota, I fell against you, weak. You put your hands through my hair as I cried like a little boy.

"Why, God?" I asked. "Why did this have to happen?"

"You're going to get through this," you said, careful not to include yourself.

On my fifty-fifth birthday—and every one following—you would not be there. I would feel your absence as a constant shadow. I would cry out in the dark, but no one would hear me.

I would come to miss the fire in your eyes, the light in your expression. Who would I be without my Sherrie?

"Fuck," I said. And then I pulled away.

I started to kick the car, not stopping when the pain shot through my leg, and then, with a balled fist, I struck the window, not once, but three times in successive motion. You cried—but I couldn't stop. I was determined to destroy the world which had destroyed me.

"Please stop," you said.

As you cried violently, I was brought back to myself. I had to step away: I had no choice.

We drove around in silence, lost for words. On the radio, a song about love and forgiveness played—but we were too consumed by darkness. We didn't listen.

"Where are we going?" you asked at last.

I grinned—and then we both started laughing.

"I hadn't thought about that," I said. It was my honesty that made you laugh most.

Reaching over, you grabbed my trembling hand.

"Can we get something to eat? I'm starved," you said.

I smirked.

"We had a soft pretzel," I said.

"Are you kidding? That was so stale," you replied. And so it was decided.

If I had been thinking clearly, I would have taken you somewhere nice, like seafood or hibachi. Maybe even Applebee's, for their margarita special. But as we drove, I lost sight of where we were. I could only think of life without my best friend.

A few minutes later, we arrived.

“McDonald’s?” you said. Your tone was striking and funny.

I shrugged.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Then you planted a kiss on my cheek.

“Every girl’s favorite,” you said, your eyes glowing with amusement.

We pulled into the drive-thru. We were caught behind four cars, one of which was playing rap music that shook the earth. Snow landed on the windshield as we drew closer.

“I want a Big Mac,” you said.

I laughed.

“Now you’re the one with surprises,” I said.

You smiled. “I’ll go back on Weight Watchers tomorrow,” you said. Even though you looked great and always have.

When we reached the window, you grabbed your purse and said, “Let me pay.”

“Get out of here,” I said.

I smiled at the employee, a young man with rectangular glasses and bushy eyebrows.

“Eight-fifty,” he said.

I handed him a ten.

“Keep the change,” I said before driving away.

But we didn’t go far. We parked in the closest spot, near a withered oak tree.

We sat in silence, unwrapping our burgers and biting into them. Craning to my side, I took a sip of my drink. Sweet root beer filled my taste buds.

“So,” I said.

“So,” you said.

Then we started giggling again, two teenagers who never grew up.

“I don’t know how I’m going to live without you, Sher,” I said. My words took you by surprise. It was as if we almost forgot the reality of our situation.

Then, you nodded. Acceptance washed over your features.

“I know,” you said.

“Is there any way you can beat this?” I asked. I took another bite of my burger.

“Definitely not,” you said.

It was the wrong answer, or at least the one I didn’t want to hear. The one I prayed against. Before I could protest, you said: “I want you to take care of my daughters.”

There they came again—the tears.

“Sherrie,” I said.

You held up your hand.

“I’ve thought a lot about this,” you said, “and it’s what needs to happen. Lord knows their dad won’t step up.”

“What about chemo?”

“Their dad doesn’t even come by on birthdays,” you said. “What a sad excuse for a man.”

We were having two different conversations, two different experiences. Mine had the happier ending. Held onto hope.

At some point, we turned to one another.

“I will always love you.”

They were the truest words I had ever spoken. And then I erupted in tears.

You turned away.

“I know,” you said, sniffing.

I could not handle the emotions brewing inside me.

“You know what we forgot?” I asked.

“What?” you asked.

I gestured toward the McDonald’s building, which still had a long line.

“We forgot our milkshakes,” I said.

You threw back your head and laughed.

“I just adore you,” you said, as I put the car in reverse and returned to the drive-thru.

“I’m going to miss getting milkshakes with you,” you said. “And pretty much everything else.”

“Me, too,” I said.

The employee seemed annoyed the second time around, but we didn’t care. To him, this was a paycheck. Spending money. For us, this was one of the last times. The beginning of the end.

Little did I know how quickly that moment was approaching, how everything would soon fade to dust. Someday, I would hold onto this memory. It would get me through my worst hours.

You reached over and grabbed my hand.

“Always remember us,” you said.



The Blizzard

By: Maggie Bayne

Maggie Bayne been writing short stories most of her life, mostly for her own entertainment. Now that she has retired, she has begun submitting some of her work, although overwhelmed by the process.

Fielding, Maine was a picturesque village nestled in the Oak Grove Mountains about 50 miles from the Atlantic Ocean.

The community consisted of about two dozen houses, all of similar design and size, distinctive only by their exterior paint colors. From a distance, the area resembled assorted playing cards dropped from an airplane, which had fluttered in the wind before landing. The houses had been constructed in the late eighteenth century for loggers who settled the area.

Fielding had once flourished. But now the logging industry and trees were gone, along with most of the population.

This location had been chosen for settlement because of the abundance of trees. Logging camps were established with a 'hit the ground running' mentality, giving little attention to long-term issues. Primitive roads had been quickly constructed to allow logging wagons and later trucks to navigate the hills, rocks, and mountain terrain.

Loggers who arrived to clear the timber and live off the land were undaunted by hardship. If a man wanted work, could swing an ax, and didn't care about comforts, he could become a logger. Hours were long, and tasks were dangerous, honing strong and dependable workers. Not a way of life for the idle.

Loggers were faced with unpredictable snowfalls, which brought new challenges each year.

"Snow? It's no big deal. We just manage to live with it." Don Fielding, who owned and operated the general store, was a direct descendant of the namesake founders. Fielding's Store was the pulse of the community and provided most of the basic needs to

the residents. "I remember my grandfather, Dwight Fielding. He was of pioneer stock, resolute and unafraid of snow and hard times. I guess I inherited his pluck."

The store had been built on Fielding's property, a few dozen yards from his home. Don knew all of the town folk and what items they might need. He could be found at the store from dawn to dusk every day.

Don lived in a large green Victorian house with his widowed mother, Ollie. Since Don's wife Martha had passed away decades before, Don and Ollie managed quite well in the big house and often shared duties at the store.

One morning, Don opened the door to see a large group of customers waiting to buy supplies. "Good morning, Fred. How's it going?"

"Fine, Don. Looks like rain."

"That's what they are saying."

"Pretty cold. Might turn to snow."

"Well, we're not going anywhere. So, if snow comes, you know where to find us if you need anything."

"If it snows a lot, I guess we could need something. Ice melt or such." Fred turned and waved a hand toward Don.

Snow began to fall before noon that day, the ominous gray of the sky warning of accumulation.

Snow continued to fall throughout that night. The next day was also deep gray, so gray that it was hard to judge the time of the day. There was no wind, but

the snowfall was steady and continuous.

All that night, the snow continued.

The following day, few shoppers ventured out, but Don Fielding opened the store and restocked the shelves as always.

“Business sure is low with all this snow,” Don had remarked to Ollie on the third day. “Do you think I need to open?”

“Oh my, yes. People up here always depend on us.”

Only two shoppers walked to the store that day.

The first to arrive was Alice Sands, born and raised just a few blocks away. She stomped her boots on the front door mat. “I had to shovel a path from our door to the sidewalk, Don. Needed some milk and bread.”

“Be careful walking back, Alice. Not too much ice yet, but it’s hard walking. Had trouble coming from the house myself.”

The following day was also snowy. No traffic of any kind was visible in Fielding. No road plows arrived. The sky remained gray, and the snow continued until after dark.

Maine highway workers and other state officials seldom worried about Fielding. The little community had muddled along for many years with no help from the “outside.” Fielding residents were always prepared for winter and, for that matter, any emergency that might arise.

On the fifth day, the snow stopped late in the afternoon. Residents all across Maine sighed with relief that this winter’s snow was over, at least for a while.

No one in Fielding had contacted the outside for help. Folks on the outside were too busy digging out their vehicles, trying to get to work, and hunkering down in their own lives to worry much about their neighbors down the street, let alone the truly independent residents up on the hill. The Fielding residents had never asked for help before during emergencies. Officials knew better than to even offer.

But the following morning, white flurries began again.

“Look, Ollie,” Don said. “It’s snowing again. I have to

get out and shovel.”

“Don, I think that’s deeper than you think.”

The latest snow had added another eight inches to the hefty snow from the previous days. Don was unable to make it down the sidewalk to the store.

He soon returned to the house. “This is a problem. The snow is deeper than I have ever seen.” He sat down on a chair near the door and removed his boots. “Don’t know what to do.”

“Why don’t you try to reach someone at the County Service office? Make someone aware of our circumstance.”

But there was no staff at the County Service office. The phone rang and rang with no answer in any department.

“No answer, Ollie.”

“Just rest a while, and I’ll make us some fresh coffee.”

“We’ve been through deep snow before. I guess we’ll be OK. I’m probably overreacting.”

Life at the County Service office had been quite hectic during the week. Jim Henning, in charge of all matters relating to snow, was at his wit’s end.

His job was to get the word out and smooth the setbacks wrought by nature. During normal snow emergencies, his staff dealt routinely with plowing streets and business closings.

But the current snowfall had more than overwhelmed the county. Plowing while snow continued to fall was useless. Municipal policies dictated that removal should begin only after the accumulation had stopped. Since the snowfall had continued for days, catching up was difficult. With the entire area surrounded by the tall, white mounds, many of the county workers had found it impossible to get to work.

Once Jim had been able to reach the office, he was buried with scores of unanswered phone messages and was merely trying to work through the backlog.

Jim’s assistant, Tom Moore, approached their office door and waited patiently for a chance to interrupt. “Jim, there’s a message from someone in Fielding. The caller wanted one of us to call them.”

“Fielding? Those folks up there are completely independent. Did it sound urgent?”

“No. I was just surprised to hear from them.”

“You know, a few years ago, I reached out to the village after a smaller snow. Actually drove up there to the store. The woman who ran the store made it quite clear that they needed no help from the outside. Only she used far more colorful words.”

“Oh, gotcha. Guess we’ll wait to see if they call again.”

The Fieldings sat down in the living room and lit the logs in the fireplace. They reminisced about previous emergencies and hardships in the community.

“Ollie, don’t you think we should try again to reach someone? Don’t we need help?”

“Don, if your ancestors could hear you say that, they would be disappointed. We are hearty folks, able to take care of ourselves. The Fielding population is tough. This is not the first time we have been cut off from the outside. And it probably won’t be the last.”

“OK. You’re probably right.”

The snow continued.

Power lines began to collapse in and around Fielding. Trees laden with snow had fallen, blocking roads and impeding traffic. Even shoppers managing to trudge to the store discovered the shelves were nearly empty.

The Fielding town folks remained in their homes, secluded from the outside world, confident that rescue would arrive.

It was another week before the snow finally halted.

Like others in town, the Thompson family had remained at home. They had consumed the contents of their pantry, except for flour, surviving on biscuit-like creations. But they were growing weaker each day.

“Gee, isn’t the snow pretty?” Eight-year-old Jimmy was the only child.

“Too much snow can be scary,” Mr. Thompson explained. “No one could reach us, but it’s over now.”

“You mean cars and trucks can use the road?”

“It won’t be long.”

After dinner of flour biscuits, Jimmy decided to venture out. He donned his green parka and boots, then slipped out of the house. The snow was surprisingly deep. Jimmy was weak, and walking was difficult. But he made his way to the corner, where he usually waited for a ride to school. He brushed the snow from a familiar fence post to wait for the rescue vehicles.

The next morning dawned clear and sunny.

As the highway workers entered the village, they were stunned by the complete silence. No sounds were heard. There were no signs of foot traffic.

“Look, there’s someone! He’s sitting on the corner over there in a green jacket.” A plow driver waved to the figure, but there was no response.

Jimmy remained motionless on the fence post, his open eyes staring into the distance.





The Light From The Tree

By: David Levine

David Levine has been writing fiction for over ten years. He has published fiction in *Fiction Southeast*, *The Thieving Magpie*, and an essay on James Baldwin and the unrest in Kenosha in *Injustice* magazine.

Take an ax to a tree. Will it bleed light? Will it push out that bright incandescent glow I had glimpsed? I don't know. I can't answer that question because I don't know every tree. But the one we struck, it was filled with light.

Two firsts for me—both came at me on the same train ride. My first time riding in a train that nearly tipped over and derailed. My first sighting of light coming out of a tree. The two went together.

I sat in the lead rail car of the train. We struck something, resistant, massed, dense enough to pitch our moving train off its tracks. My mind reached for what it seemed to be—what it had to be—a cow, car, boulder, another train, or the Colossus straddling the tracks.

I felt the train shutter. Bags left in the aisle tumbled by my seat. A coat dropped down from the overhead shelf like an unfurled banner. The train seemed to buck, bending its backbone toward the sky.

Seconds after the impact, a broken tree soared by the open window across the aisle from me. Its jointed branches, twiggy tips and gator-skin bark scratched and dug into the siding of the rail car. I then saw the burst of a strobe-like light in the window. The tree then flew away.

I sensed—knew, believed beyond a doubt—the light came from the tree. Where else?

Braking hard and fast, the train shook like a kite tail in a high wind. A young woman seated behind me gasped and mumbled something about Sweet Jesus. I recognized none of her words.

I watched the other passengers press their hands flat against the seats in front of them. I did the same. My knees dug into the plastic armor of the seatback in front of me. Bracing for the worst; hoping for the best.

The train finally groaned to a full stop. The overhead lights went off. Weak daylight from outside the train came through the windows. Cell phone screen lights whitened the faces of the passengers.

Bored, a small boy yawned and poked his mother. Both sat next to me in my row. She tried to calm herself by playing Sudoku on her phone. She looked fiercely into the moated space of her phone screen. Her hands shook for minutes. It was a near miss for all of us.

The passenger in the seat directly across the aisle didn't look around the car. He sat beneath a tree branch marooned in the open window. His shoulders were rounded, almost to the point of a crowning hump—I took him for an old man.

His face was bent over the book on his lap. He had found enough light to read his book. A leaf from the tree branch fell from the window. It landed on his head and stayed there.

Two firsts on one train ride. I remember the near derailment of my train at the same moment when the light flashed from the broken tree. I don't know that it is so unusual—the linkage of two disparate, dissimilar events at one time.

Always the two events housed together in my memory. Both have stayed with me.



The conductor rushed up the aisle to the train driver's compartment. The driver stepped out of the compartment to meet him. They both wore fluorescent orange vests. The driver had a silver cross made from reflective tape on his vest.

As I studied the train driver, his face changed in the vaporous half-light around us. He knew where the tree strike could have led: his train running off its narrow gauge tracks. He looked out the window, back to the conductor speaking to him, and then down the aisle. His face had the fluidity of river weed moving in a stream.

The conductor unlocked the rail car's side door and slid it open. He jumped down to the track bed. The driver looked out through the new opening in the rail car. He stood there, his vest like loose netting, and pressed his hand on the wall of the car.

I knew why he waited to jump—or, at best, I could make a good guess. Outside his train, they'd come after him. I imagined he'd have to sit at a large wooden table in a fiercely lit room. His supervisor, a brother railman who no longer drove trains, would shuffle near the table and wince from the light.

The supervisor would point at a blanket-sized rail map spread on the table. (It would be filled with hash marks symbolizing rail tracks.)

"See, you had enough time to stop the train," he'd bark at him. The driver would remain quiet under his heavy words.

"You own this one, buddy," he'd tell him.

Standing before the opening, I suspected the driver knew what was ahead of him. His long train-driving career—I assumed he had a long career—would come down to a single pink slip. I wondered if train drivers, or anyone else for that matter, still received pink slips.

Watching him, I believed he saw the wilderness alongside the train. It had become his wilderness. The driver had to enter it. He couldn't avoid not going into it.

He did not jump from the train like the conductor. He slowly stepped down the metal steps fixed to the side of the train. He dropped from my view.



I heard the conductor and driver speaking outside. I couldn't make out what they said. I heard two loud bangs from the undercarriage of the train. There were more words, a softer bang, and the echo of their footsteps pressing down the crushed stones of the track bed.

The two then climbed back into our rail car. The conductor and driver huddled for a minute. It struck me that they stood close enough to hear the breathing, maybe even the heartbeats, of the other man.

The driver's hands were wet. He stood still as though leashed to a seat in the car. His face blazed with a pinkness. He feared what was in store for him. The pink measured his wish—or was it a hope?—for another exit door. He was hoping for something other than the wilderness and his supervisor.

He returned to the driver's compartment in the front of the car. He pulled shut the door and locked it. The train lurched ahead. I listened to its heavy wheels turning on the rails.

The overhead aisle lights came back on. Several passengers applauded. Air hissed from the vents near my feet. Our speed grew. The trees alongside the train became a running green line again.

The driver was careful with his train. He did not push it. Our train moved ahead like a heavy dresser pushed along the floor. We crawled ahead, nothing fast.



A month after our near derailment, the rail supervisor asked me to his office and questioned me about the tree strike. I sat at a wooden table in a long room. The supervisor walked around near me.

"Did the train feel like it was going too fast around that last curve?" Probably in his mid-sixties, his chest did not fill his white shirt. He seemed to shrink under his clothes before me.

"Not that I could tell," I answered him.

"What do you think caused the accident, then? The driver? The speed of the train?" He came close to knocking over an ashtray on the table. He bumped it and it slid toward me, causing its stubby cigarette ends to shake in the tray.

I told him: "A tree leaned too far over the train tracks. It hoped to show us its inner light."

“What light? What are you talking about?”

“I saw the light from the tree,” I said. I wanted to say more—something about how I’d wager the driver saw the light, too—but his face had turned hard as slate. If I had said anything more, the driver would pay dearly.



The driver and I shared something together. It was the light from the tree—and it was more. It was the light from the tree unleashed during a near train disaster. For me, it will likely be a one-off coincidence, as far as I know.

The driver saw it first. The train struck the tree just below the driver’s window. That light sprang from the bark-encased tree—I thought of its bark as shrink wrap; so tight was it around the tree—and made its way to both of us.

The light streamed to the driver’s eyes as though pushed through crystal. Then it jumped into my eyes for me to behold. I knew he saw it. We saw it together.

The light was shared by us two and gave me a view into his life. Standing with him, alongside him, I saw the dense wilderness outside the train, too. Everyone out in the wilderness waited to do him in. The ending had to be his firing. It had to be.

I phoned the rail supervisor a week after my interview. He confirmed the driver had been let go. I listened to him push his glass ashtray away from the phone.





Illuminated

By: Stephanie Daich

Everything I touch dies.

It wasn't always like this.

I lived an average life with a carbon footprint cleaner than most Brits.

"Anslie, where are you headed today?" Mom asked as I loaded my hiking pack with supplies.

"Hadrian's Wall Path," I replied, stuffing the last of my food into my pack. I lifted the bag and the weight dragged on my arms. It seemed heavier than usual. I needed to keep the weight to around three stones.

THUMP. I dropped the hefty bag and then opened it, displacing my careful organization. *I guess I could do without the ax.* I tossed it aside. I would need to take more weight out than that. My hike would last several days, making the pack feel even heavier than it already did. Where was the extra sweater I had packed? I guess I could do without it.

Mom watched and rubbed her forehead. "I hate that you do these adventures on your own. You are barmy. What if something happens to you? How would we even know you need help?"

My hands felt the soft sweater and yanked it out. I had a baselining and hoped it would keep me warm. I rearranged my bag. ZIP. I closed it. The pack still pulled at my arms as I lifted it up. *Yup, still heavy. Oh well, it will have to do.* I couldn't part with anything else.

Mom hovered over me, and my muscles constricted. "I'll be fine." My tone came out snarkier than I meant it to.

Stephanie Daich has been writing for 12 years. "The Song of Poverty" and "For The Love of Pete" are some of her works. Publications include *Making Connections*, *Youth Imaginations*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Kindness Matters*, and others.

She circled me, clicking her tongue. "That pack seems as big as you."

Couldn't she appreciate my tenacity? I could be dim and lounge on her couch all day without ambition instead.

Something sharp poked through the pack into my back. *I can't hike with that shoving into my shoulder blades. Great, I have to open it again.*

THUMP. I dropped my bag and once again opened it. I fished around until I found the pan that had pierced me. I moved it to the other side of the bag and put my baselining in its place. I tried the pack on again, and this time it felt better—still heavy, though.

"What if someone tries to hurt you?"

"Good thing I know Jiu-Jitsu." My shoulders almost sang in relief as I removed the pack and set it on the couch. Stealthily, I went behind Mom and put her in a rear-naked choke. "I'll choke out any fool that messes with me." Mom's nails scraped at my arm. I let her go without putting on real pressure.

Cough. Mom rubbed her neck. "What about wild animals?"

I faced her. "Mom, seriously, stop waffling. I will be alright."

And I was. As I traveled Hadrian's Wall Path, the sense of adventure held promise for a phenomenal hike. I was on a ledge. My spirit escaped my tense body, bonding with nature as I walked along the Antonine Wall. Various shades of green covered the rolling hills. I sighed, releasing months of suppressed tension. I needed more nature in my life. While others relied

on drugs to find their zen, my high came from hikes. Only at night did the chilly air penetrate my clothes, leaving me wishing I hadn't removed my sweater. I shivered in my bag, imagining one day leaving it all behind to spend the rest of my life hiking.

My Hadrian expedition ended too quickly, and I sadly returned to work to save money for my next journey. I hated how brick and mortar suppressed my liveliness and trapped me in conformity. Seven agonizing months dragged on until I returned to God and country along the peninsula in Caithness, on the north coast of Scotland.

Dunnet Head took my breath away!

I could taste the salt as I took in deep breaths of the sea air. It seemed pure and cleansing. The humidity clung to my skin, leaving water droplets on my arm and facial hairs.

Why did I have to work? I could spend the rest of my life in nature.

As I explored the coastal clifftop, kittiwakes floated effortlessly in the breeze, chirping as if to say hello. The wind swept my hair into my eyes. I used the elastic from my wrist and tied my rogue hair back. Warmth from the sun radiated across my skin. It seemed extra warm for being so north.

I struggled to remove my bulky pack, its strap catching on my arm. It left my back soaking wet from sweat. Free from the weight, I felt like the wind could blow me off the cliff's edge. I almost let it, wanting to soar like the birds. I sat over the precipice and let my legs dangle above the vast Atlantic Ocean, watching the gulls disappear. Far below, the waves crashed against the rocks.

Across the Pentland Firth, I could barely see the Isle of Stroma. I would have loved to explore the cliffs and see Castle Mestag and the old Norsk presence now in ruins. My hands tingled when I saw two porpoises swimming below me. Their triangular dorsal fins sliced through the Atlantic. Maybe I could jump off the cliff, soar down to the porpoise, and ride them to the isle. *If only.*

GROWL. My stomach pulled me away from meditating. I found a mylar packet of tuna in my bag and opened it. The pungent, fishy odor smelt much like the place. *When was the last time I had eaten anything?* My dirty fingers scooped out wet, flaky fish, and I shoved the pieces into my mouth. Within

seconds I had finished the tuna. I licked the smooth wrapper, still hungry for more. That morsel of protein hadn't done anything to stop my appetite, in fact, my stomach clenched in pain, begging for more. I had to be careful with how I rationed my food. But I didn't care, because I sat in one of the most serene places I had ever experienced. I would celebrate it with food. I pulled out a bag of dehydrated apricots and munched on them, loving the chewy sensation as their sweetness exploded in my mouth. *This is living!* I leaned against my pack and closed my eyes.

A large rumbling shook the cliff, and I quickly scooted away from the edge. A few pebbles tumbled down into the ocean, swallowed by the surf. *Did anyone else feel that?* I searched the ridgeline, but I saw no one. *Was that an earthquake?*

A loud roaring vibrated through my body as if a jet plane was flying directly over me. I looked up and frightfully stumbled next to the edge. My heart pounded against my chest so hard I saw it ripple under my shirt.

A massive ball of light was headed toward me. I scooted backward on my butt, too afraid to stand. The light's intensity forced my eyes closed, almost boiling them in their sockets. My eyelids were a lousy shield from the irradiating furnace I felt rumbling closer to me. KABOOM! The light smacked into me. Everything burned, sizzling my skin. Instantly, the brightness that penetrated my eyelids stopped. I opened them. Everything had returned to normal, except my glowing yellow skin. It looked as if the flames lapped at every centimeter of me. I rolled away from the cliff's edge, trying to extinguish the fire. I bathed in the dirt until I realized I had no fire on me. Under a layer of dust, my skin still illuminated light as if I was a log in a fire pit. I ran my hand over my quivering skin. It didn't feel particularly hot.

What had just happened? When the fireball hit me, if that's what it was, it felt as if the sun had torched my entire body, yet nothing appeared burnt. *What should I do?* Absentmindedly, I ran my hand along pink flowers on the heather shrub. After sitting in a stupor for almost two hours, I ate another pack of tuna. The glow from my skin had mostly dissipated, but I still shone like a glow stick.

I stood up and noticed the entirety of the heather where I had sat had burnt to a crisp. Wait, hadn't there just been flowers there?

The experience disrupted my tranquility. With

nothing left to do, I decided to go explore the lighthouse and military remains.

I walked about 12 kilometers toward Castletown and pitched my tent outside of the village. I tried to sleep, but it felt like I had a methamphetamine IV pump pulsing energy through my core. I tossed around and eventually turned to journaling. I didn't need my lantern, for my skin provided a low glow in the tent.

Morning brought the sounds of MOO! GRUNT. SHUFFLE. A considerable amount of activity was happening outside. Light trickled into the tent from the rising sun. I unzipped the opening and found myself surrounded by a herd of Scottish Highland Cattle. I pinched my nose to try to block their musky odor. The burnt orange bovines were grazing way too close to me. I zipped myself back into the tent, not sure what to do. *Maybe I'll wait it out. They have to leave sometime.* But they didn't. After several hours, it became clear those little wooly mammoths weren't going anywhere. Cautiously, I climbed out and packed up my gear with my nerves on high alert. The cows casually watched me, for the most part uninterested in the glowing human. It wouldn't take much for them to drive their thick horns into my abdomen.

With everything strapped to my back, I continued to Castletown and walked by a group of kids. They stopped talking and stared at me.

"Look," a kid said, pointing to me. "It is Lugh, Mighty God of Light."

"Don't hurt us," another said.

The kids grabbed each other's hands, then ran toward the village.

I couldn't go into the village glowing. I dropped my pack and pulled out my jacket to hide my luminating arms. I wrapped a scarf around my face, leaving a small opening for my eyes. The heat overwhelmed me, but I couldn't be seen as a radiated twit. I had planned to spend a few days in Castletown but thought better of it.

I tried to avoid areas of the population as I continued hiking. As I walked late into the evening, my mind tried to make sense of everything, when I heard clumping. I looked up in time to see a ravage black and white goat charging forward, its curved horns aimed right at me.

The blunt impact propelled me onto my back,

cushioned by the hiking pack. The goat backed up and came at me again. Its horns once again smashed into my side, causing ricocheting pain. As my adrenalin spiked, I grabbed the goat's horns and shook its head back and forth. Its powerful body struggled for freedom. *What do I do?* If I let him go, he would continue ramming me. While he struggled, the freakiest thing happened. His horns turned black, and the darkness spread to his head, neck, and entire body. Within minutes, he looked as if he had been roasted on a spit. Life exited him, and he dropped dead. I released his horns and stumbled to my knees. My breath came out in quickened bursts. Had the goat been possessed? They use goats in satanic rituals. My mouth became the Dungeness Desert and my muscles tightened.

I stood up and awkwardly ran, my pack slowing my pace. I could smell the sweet aroma of cooked goat. I stopped and looked back at it, afraid its zombie body would chase me. It remained where it had died. My stomach growled, reminding me I had only eaten grub for the last two weeks. I had never tried goat, but I knew that people ate it.

"Are you kidding yourself? If you eat that demonic goat, you will surely suffer horrific food poisoning," my shoulder angel warned.

"Yeah, you are right."

I turned my back to the goat, but the smell lured me in. It smelled much like broiled mutton, which I adored. I don't know why the goat died, but it shouldn't die in vain.

I found my knife and worked out a chunk of juicy flesh. I had struggled more than I thought I would as I tore through its hide. The tender meat almost melted in my mouth. I couldn't control my ravenous appetite and consumed probably a kilogram of savory delight.

With a painfully full stomach, I stretched in the long grass and took a kip.

A deep voice woke me. "What do we got here?"

I looked up at a large man towering above me. My heart raced.

"It's just a dead goat," I replied. "It tried to kill me."

The man didn't look at the goat, staring down at me. His eyes conveyed something wicked, foul.

“What’s a cute lass doing out here by herself?”

I had to think quickly. “I am not alone. My dad is just over there, somewhere. So, you can, you can just bugger off.” I pointed behind me. I didn’t trick him. He knew I was alone. I looked to the ground for my knife. It was stuck in the side of the goat.

The man straddled me and rubbed my cheek. My blood set to concrete, my body too stiff to move. His hot, putrid lips planted on mine. They felt like acid. “My little trollop,” he cooed. “You must be an angel the way you glow. An angel sent to rescue me.” He kissed me again, bringing his bow ski body closer to mine.

What do I do? What do I do? My mind fog cleared. I had been secretly waiting for a day like this. For the past five years, I had studied Jiu-Jitsu and was a purple belt. No one ever wants to be in a situation where they have to use it to defend their life, yet we Jiu-Jitsu competitors always fantasize that one day we will use it to save our life. The man was probably double my weight, but that didn’t matter. As long as he wasn’t a brown belt in Jiu-Jitsu, I knew I could save myself.

I framed his body, shrimped out, and then in one swooping motion, I stuffed his right arm between us, pulled his left arm to my side, and wrapped my legs around his head. I pulled his body into me as my thighs compressed around his neck. Within seconds I choked him out.

I had always wondered what I would do in a situation like this. Would I choke my assailant to unconsciousness and then flee, or would I kill the SOB? A rapist didn’t deserve mercy. As I continued to apply pressure and debate ending the rapist’s life, the decision was removed from me. Just like the goat, blackness moved across the man. And probably quicker than I could kill him, his whole body blackened, and he died.

I pushed his incinerated body off mine and scooted away. The aromatic smell of grilled meat hit me, smelling like a Sunday BBQ. I rolled onto my knees and violently puked.

I wrapped my arms around my knees and sobbed. I had just killed a man. I mean, I think I had killed him. I hadn’t ended his life by strangulation, but somehow, just like the goat, I had turned him into a burnt corpse. It gutted me. I wiped the leftover smear of puke from my chin. I looked around and noticed everywhere I had sat appeared as if a ground fire had occurred.

When my fit of hysteria ended, I gathered my gear and walked back to Castletown. My adventure had ended. I needed Mom. I would secure a passage home.

All the events since the sunburst played through my head. The glowing skin, the burnt heather, the incinerated goat, and the charred man. Was I infused with radiation that killed any living thing that touched me? I tested the grass and watched it blacken, wither, and die under my touch. I experimented on plants, trees, and a field mouse. All died.

I am a freak!

I couldn’t return home. What if Mom touched me? She would touch me. I would try to avoid it, but eventually, it would happen, and Mom would burn to a crisp like the rapist.

I could never be around people again. So, in a way, I guess I got what I always wanted. I became a skint vagabond, leaving brick and mortar to wander the highlands of Scotland forever.



Elmwood

By: David LaRoche

Elmwood—a small town where wheat grew and was stored in silos awaiting a train to carry it off; where LeRoy’s Bowling offered three lanes, a bar, and a dance square but shuttered at ten; where boys grew into the jobs from which their daddies had died; and where thirty-year-old Florence Reddy wiped down the counter at May’s Diner. Floyd Dietz had finished his pie and was now on home to Molly, leaving a few crumbs and a ring from his cup. The clock at May’s said some past ten.

Another slow night, and Flo considered a dime for the jukebox. She’d be there till midnight, with truckers occasionally—long-haulers, alone, goin’ one way or the other. She rinsed and wrung out her wiping towel.

Headlights flashed across the full front windows and a crunch of gravel came rollin’ through the diner’s open door. Flo could hear the diesel knocking, and then a whump as the engine stopped, kicked back a quarter turn. The headlamps dimmed and then extinguished; a door slammed shut. A big rig stirring up its expected commotion. There was always dust.

The diner door opened wide as the bell above tinkled a three-bar tune. Well-aged boots and a wide-brimmed Stetson came in on a lanky dude with a smile as wide as his narrow face, which was dark with sun. His big brown eyes, planted wide, offered a warm invitation; a graying shrub grew under his narrow nose, and working-man hands hung at the ends of his long and muscular arms.

“Howdy, Miss. Surprised to see you open.”

“Here till midnight, alone or not. What can I get you?”

“Les-see...” He plopped himself on a stool at the counter. “I’m hankerin’ for something light and restful.”

David LaRoche is a member of the California Writers Club, held several offices, and founded and edited their Literary Review. He has published three novels, a small collection, and has written dozens of short stories. His work can be found on Amazon. David is currently working on a new novel.

“Pie and coffee?” She smiled. “Got a tasty fresh rhubarb tonight.”

“Nooo, I need more’n pie. Been a while since last fillin’ up. Maybe a grilled cheese with bacon.”

“Wheat, rye, or sourdough?” she asked. “Take a few minutes to heat up the grill.”

“Yep, that’ll be it, cheddar and bacon on sourdough, and a vanilla milkshake.”

He watched as she scraped the grill—strawberry blond with a girlish figure and birthing hips struck him as an appealing combination. He liked a woman he could feel in his arms, a woman of substance. She looked to be close—“touch and tug” wandered his mind.

“You gotta name?” he spoke up from the counter.

“Flo.” She turned from the grill and pointed out her tag.

“Well, howdy again, Flo. I go by Henry. Whatta you do in this little town, this late, this night?”

“Most are sleeping off a hard day’s work. Likely some kids at the river.”

“What’s doing at the river?”

“Smooching and dippin’, I suppose... some workin’ up to it.” She winked. “You want a dill pickle to go with your grill?”

“Yes’m, Flo. A big fat dill’d be near perfect.”

“Where you headed and where you been, if you don’t mind my askin’.”

“Comin’ from the east and goin’ west.” He chuckled. “But in no hurry, got layover time and fixin’ right now to use it in Elmwood.”

“Vanilla, you said?”

“And after the sandwich.” He checked out her hands, bare of ownership and a delicate white, if strong, and her nails cut short. He was a “woman’s man,” the word around—he knew what to say, when to say it, and then what to do.

“Here ya go, darlin’—grilled white cheddar and bacon. You want coffee? I’ll get you some water, if you like.” He seemed a nice man, a gentle sort.

“Thank you, Flo. Real nice job on the grill—that perfect golden brown. Sit down here with me and rest for a spell. No need for the coffee.” He offered his generous smile.

“Why, I s’pose I could,” she said. “Let’s take a booth, where we’ll be more comfortable. I’ll bring my coffee. Do you need any help?”

“Nope, got it handled.” He picked up and went to the booth she had nodded toward, then watched her come down the aisle with her coffee.

“You let me know when you want that shake.” She wiggled her hips a hint, and sat opposite him. “You just passin’ through, got family somewhere?” She liked the cut of his jaw, the lines in his face, and his quiet, soulful eyes. Judged him to be about fifty, a good lookin’ fifty at that.

“Don’t everyone, somewhere?”

“Don’t everyone what?”

“Plum forgot.” He laughed. “Sure fits the bill, this here sandwich. The dill’s a tasty chaser, and I thank you for that suggestion.”

“You say you got layover time to spend here in Elmwood. You have a place to stay—family or friends? I might recommend—”

“No need. I carry my quarters with me—all the comforts of home in that cab. Just need a place to park her, and I’m thinkin’ right here might work out.”

“I suppose around back would be best. There’s space, and the night patrolman don’t ever leave his cruiser’s comfort, so likely won’t notice you there.”

His eyebrows arched. His smile widened, as he took her hand gently.

“Why that’s just a splendid idea, Flo. Saved a bunch of wanderin’. Tell me, if you don’t mind. Are you tied in with anyone special-family here, kids, a spouse?”

She saw an innocence in his face with only a hint of eagerness—a boy who just asked his grandma for a quarter to ride the mechanical bull. He wanted to show her his fearlessness, but wouldn’t be disappointed with no.

“All my kin are living here—generations.” She watched him eat, deliberate and careful—treating the sandwich, the care that went into its making, with a certain respect.

“Must be helpful in times of need. I don’t have that—it’s just me... raised up by a grandpa who passed years ago.” He smiled. “With the road and all, it would be unfair to leave someone at home, just waitin’.”

“You must get lonely sometimes.”

“Yes’m, God knows that.”

“Me too, Henry. This town doesn’t offer much. It’s just me and May and the diner. Went bowlin’ last month with the church ladies.” She laughed and glanced at the clock.

“I s’pose it’s time to pull the rig around back. How much for the register?”

“The shake,” she said. “We forgot the shake.”

“Got a fresh bottle of Old Grandad in the sleeper, just waitin’ to be uncorked. Glasses for two?”

She smiled warmly.

He got up. She got up. They brushed on their way to the counter. She keyed, and the cash drawer sprung out. She looked up at him. Their eyes met and held.

“You thinkin’ yes...”

“Never been in a sleeper before...”

She turned out the lights and locked the door. Her arm around his waist, his over her shoulder, they strolled to the truck.



It Stalks in the Night, Death's Cold Blue Eyes

By: Hario Tezawa

Hario Tezawa is a fantasy writer based out of the barren wastelands of New Jersey. He enjoys pretending to write at pretentious cafes and has a short story published with *Faeries & Ents*.

Death loomed in the trees again that night. It stared unblinking at Den-mother with indifferent blue eyes. Each moon-cycle since the skin-walkers encroached on her territory, Den-mother could feel Death's intent gaze growing closer. One by one, with the coming of the sky-lights, another of her pack crossed into the endless night—but she could not dwell on that now. She focused on what burned before her: the killing light.

Skin-walkers never heeded her pack's warnings. Gangling limbed and mobile atop their hind legs alone, they continued their rapacious hunts across marked lands, draining resources, slaughtering until quarry dwindled scarcely. With the winds growing colder and her young growing thinner, Den-mother saw that clear lines were crossed and must be redrawn.

It began from the shadows: Den-mother and her two brothers prowled, invisible through the night. As the blackened wood smoldered and crumbled, and the skin-walker's warriors retired to their pelt-dens, Den-mother materialized in the moonlight. Her coat gleamed akin to the glowing embers which the skin walkers nursed.

While skin-walker's claws were stubby and brittle, their teeth dull and useless, and their grotesque forms sickly, scant of fur, and unfit to survive amidst the harsh elements, their cleverness was unmatched. They devised methods to bend nature to their will: they wielded the flickering warmth, the essence of life and the source of their power, and brought it down upon their prey with deliberation; they sharpened stone-bits of the land into false fangs of destruction, cutting down foe both up close and afar; but perhaps the most troubling, most revolting of their tampering with worldly law was their uncanny command of the pack-less.

Traitorous defectors of Den-mother's kin, their perverted appearance was as repulsive as their obeisance. Upon Den-mother and her charge's approach, the pack-less stirred and, detecting hostile scents, bore their pitiful fangs and growled at their betters. While Den-mother understood the significance of composure, her younger brother earned himself many scars acting on volatile impulses, marking the defector's territorial growls as the cataclysmic clarion calls of combat.

Ashen-gray fur bristled, leg muscles tensed, and the pack-less were forced to stare down the beast with one amber eye. One of the pack-less whimpered at the sight of Scar's other eye, milky white, with a prominent scar cutting through like cracked stone from his marred ear to his split quaking lips, which parted and twisted into a hungry, vicious growl.

Scar's unbridled aggression palpable, he descended upon the abominations.

Scar's teeth sank deep, rupturing vitality—

Crimson spurted from the wound while his foe took a final, shuddered breath—

The other pack-less rushed in on Scar—

Den-mother barked and intercepted the defectors— The size of the Den-kin, along with the experienced years as apex hunters and stalwart guardians, proved too much; the pack-less were overpowered. Den-mother and her two brothers tore their foes asunder, executing practiced formations, cutting tendons, slashing throats. They saturated the land with the innards of their enemies, composing swan songs in fading whimpers.

Scar licked his fangs in delight.

Den-mother's elder brother approached: a tall, strong creature with a coat the stark black of a barren season night; his backside fur boasted a gleaming white plane of fresh-fallen snow.

A sharp flash of fang—

A slight whimper—

A thin rivulet of red trickled down Scar's leg.

Snowback's guttural growl rippled his lips over marbled gums and snarled teeth, furious at the runt's reckless behavior. The longest lived in the pack, Snowback was expected to bear the title of leader, but the position required difficult choices to be made, choices he found far too heavy. Snowback rejected the necessary price of command, abdicating to Den-mother without question. But even still, Snowback understood the significance of tactic, of structure, and made a point to remind his temerarious brother.

Den-mother thought of exercising discipline herself but judged the shamed look in Scar's eyes to be an affirmation of understanding.

Den-mother's focus wavered, momentarily wandering towards the trees: even through the thickets and underbrush and tree trunks, those blue eyes continued their stare.

Snowback cried out, the wail echoing through the tundra. Scar cried out, filled with panicked rage. Den-mother tensed, her eyes examining the battlefield; she let her guard falter, allowed her group's carelessness to fester, and now Death would reap its reward.

The false fang cut into Snowback's hindleg, forcing him to his knee. The skin-walkers screeched. Braying females and young fled their pelt-dens. A large, fur-faced male gripped his carved stick, tipped with a glinting false fang, and signaled the counterattack.

Den-mother's imposing size was notable, even amongst the pack, and demanded her enemies' complete attention. She bore her killing smile and growled her thunder song, staggering her foes. Forever since this day, the progeny of those who bore witness to Den-mother's defiant stand would recount how the feral guardian of this land emblazoned like the color of falling leaves.

In Den-mother's peripherals, she detected shadowed

warriors positioned at her flanks. Unable to turn, the stench of Snowback's blood permeated the air; she hoped his alluring coat was spared. Her snarls filled the forest.

Her charge surrounded, with far too many of the fiends awaiting the opportunity to strike, she knew they would not get far with one injured and their backs turned. If the three of them were felled that night, the Den would succumb to the coming of the barren season, if not the skin-walkers themselves. A hand twitched—

The pain cut through her like no other tooth or claw. It tore through her insides, twisting and pulling, and not even the great Den-mother could suppress her cries.

She knew it was foolish, but she looked back; it would be the last time she would ever see them, her brothers. Her beautiful brothers.

She barked the order: retreat.

Snowback resisted and tried standing his ground, but his wound worsened. Precious seconds of his existence seeped out. His vision blurred; each pulsation threatened to draw him into the dark. He would never walk the same.

Den-mother heard movement—

Thoughtless, she lunged—

She burst forth with power and purpose—

The stone pierced deep into her chest—

Her mouth suffused with viscous copper—

Searing pain dampened her body . . .

Den-mother could feel the blue eyes watching; its hungry stare bore into her fatal wounds.

She barked the order once more, and still Snowback maintained his staunch defiance. Scar bit into his brother's neck and pulled: it was his turn to keep formation.

Den-mother turned and nearly collapsed doing so. She heard Snowback's pain—twigs snapped, and stiff leaves crumbled underneath his frantic thrashing. Snowback's fangs dug deep into Scar's hide, demanding . . . pleading to aid their sister, but

Scar's determination and respect for his sister's final command deafened his ears and inhibited the hurt.

Her brother's errant behaviors surprised Den-mother. She assured herself of their resilience. They would survive. The skin-walker's attention shifted to her brothers. Sinew flexed, and a howl erupted.

Death would not take her brothers.

Den-mother moved in to kill, the power of her jaws crushing the small bones of the first skin-walker's neck.

All enemy eyes returned to the true threat.

She recalled stories of her ancestors—of the Rush. How it overtook the mind and body during treacherous hunts against scaled titans and the log-nosed goliaths. She recalled the old songs that recounted the numbing of fatal pain, the uncanny ability to strike with the speed and force of a storm; although another false fang cut through her, Den-mother pounced onto her next mark, feeling nothing but the Rush.

Den-mother snuffed the life from one skin-walker to the next—

She flowed with the fluidity of a riverbend—

Thoughtless, she chased only the taste of blood—
Mindless, she heard nothing but their terror—

The squelch of pierced flesh radiated throughout her right side: she would feel it later—

Down went another—

Tears mixed with blood as a skin-walker's face split apart from excavating claws—

Another collapsed under her pouncing weight—

Evisceration flayed open skin like caught salmon, dimmed eyes bulged, mouths forever stuck in a silent scream—Another stone stabbed through her breast—

It sliced wrong and awful, but she endured—

She dammed throat-lines and spilled viscera, but the hurt crept in, the gelid touch of the ever-night chilling her legs. Den-mother's legs faltered, and her nose hit the ground; she could ignore the pangs of pain no longer.

She knew what came next.

Den-mother detested how man walked in the skin of the fallen—it was barbaric. It disgusted her to think that the next time her brothers saw her, they would see into eyes not her own.

She wondered if her brothers were safe. She wished to call to them and for them to call back. But she could not, and she would never know if they would . . .

The skin-walkers stood effete, their nerves petrified, and Den-mother sensed hesitation. She sneered at her executors and swelled with pride: she forever tainted their resolve.

In time, one skin-walker mustered the courage to approach. She tried relaying her hate, but the piece of stone lodged in her neck obfuscated the sound, rendering it a meek, indignant gurgle. It was not her proudest moment.

Sight clouded, her executor's silhouette stood over her, ready to deliver an unfortunate end.

An erumpent roar resonated from the forest.

The skin warriors trembled as the bellow rattled the squirrels from their burrows and shook nesting birds free from their canopies. The skin-walkers trembled: they may recover from this battle, but their reduced numbers and fractured will could not handle an attack from a great honey-beast.

The skin-walkers abandoned their pelt-dens and their dead. Den-mother laid in waiting, her thoughts waning, growing colder and colder.

The honey-beast roared again, and, even on the brink, Den mother's fur bristled. She was a warrior till the bitter end. She heard her demise lumber closer and closer, its trundling enveloping all other sounds. Wish granted: she would be eaten. Den-mother accepted this. Her remains would return to the land, opposed to being perverted and worn.

But she felt no fur or claws or teeth, not even spine tingling breath. The touch was frigid and metal, and Den-mother could hear the rumblings of a distant brontide.

It stepped around her into view: cold, indifferent blue eyes met her own.

From the surface of its lifeless, round hide, green

life grew. There were holes and slashes and burns throughout its diminutive frame. It stared at her. It said nothing.

Den-mother scrutinized Death: she did not expect it to be so small . . . so unassuming.

Death's chest crackled and howled her pack-song, imitating Den-mother's signature exactly, leaving her in awe. The primal call echoed and filled the night sky.

Then her pack responded, answering her copied cries. Their song was pain. In mourning. She heard both Snowback's and Scar's harmonized sorrow within the canine chorus—they were alive. Their songs hurt the most, but they were of resilient stock. Den-mother knew they would be fine.

Death sat there next to her, unblinking. She gazed up at the moon. The gentle night breeze brushed her fur and caressed her broken body. The night-gloves gathered around to perform their nocturnal symphony and lull her into that ever-night; in time, immense fatigue weighed down on her entire body, enveloping her completely in an ambivalent embrace.

Death loomed over her that night. It gazed unashamed at her with those comforting blue eyes. Perhaps it followed all living purposely, ever-present so that no soul slept alone... Den-mother's eyes grew heavy . . . then they closed . . . it was dark . . . and she could only hear the distant sound of rolling thunder . . .



One Last Coffee

By: Kat Gál

Kat Gál is a writer, runner, traveler, bookworm, and cat lover. Kat is a freelance health writer creating online and offline content for functional medicine doctors and enjoys creative writing in her free time.

I am sitting at a coffee shop when I notice you. You are wearing your favorite shirt. You found it in Spain on a study abroad trip back in college, but you still love wearing it. It's so loose your small beer belly is invisible. "This is all they had," you said. Oversized was the style back then, anyways.

You can't see me. I don't think you can. You would probably leave if you knew I was here. Or maybe you would just pretend that you didn't notice me. Maybe you are pretending now. Are you pretending?

You look different. It's your face. You are clean-shaven, and your hair is cut short. You used to hate shaving. You never cared to grow out a beard, but you never reached for a razor more than once a week. Usually longer. "So scratchy," I used to giggle every time we kissed. Your curly hair was long when we met. It was covering your eyes most of the time. I am not sure how you ever saw me through that haystack of a mess.

But you did see me. I was sitting at the library at grad school when you came over.

"I see you running all the time," you said.

Your deep blue eyes mesmerized me. You had been watching me for weeks. Every day, without fail, you plopped down with a sandwich, the giant oak near the union. While watching the falling leaves, you noticed my ponytail bouncing up and down with each stride. You were not a runner. Yet, for some reason, you found it fascinating how I was running around campus during my lunch break.

I was the graduate assistant for the track team. I had to get my own workouts in before their practice.

"I'm training for a marathon," I said.

That's awesome, you seemed to care. Maybe you truly cared. Maybe you were pretending.

"I hate your sweaty running clothes everywhere," you yelled. That was years later, though. You were probably not thinking about stinky sports bras back then. You asked me out a week later and the rest was history.

And now we are history. I am watching you from afar. You are with her now. Does she even know that you have curly hair? Does she care about basketball, like you do? What do you have in common with her? What did we have in common?

We moved in together a year later. Everything was exciting. I was in my last year in grad school. You just started a new job as an engineer. We had sex in every corner of the apartment that day. Of course, it was only a small one-bedroom. Still, we were full of passion. In love.

I shouldn't be watching you. It's bringing back too many memories. The way you are smiling at her. You used to smile at me the same. You are beautiful. That's what you are telling her right now. That's what you used to tell me. Then you hold her hand and rub her index finger like you used to rub mine. But now your eyes are locked with hers. I am just watching from afar.

"Where were you?" your eyes narrowed as you asked. I was only ten minutes late. There was traffic. "What's wrong?" my lips were shaking. "What's wrong?!" your fist clenched. You were so angry. I didn't get it. "You shouldn't be going out with your friends after school." But I wasn't. I came straight home. It was the traffic. There was an accident on the highway. You didn't believe me. We had dinner plans. I am home now. I was only ten minutes late. You were still furious. I promised not to be late next time. You didn't speak to me for a day.

A week later, you went out with your buddies. I wanted to see Jenna, but you got so upset. Jenna is a bad influence. Why can't you just stay home? Relax. Watch TV. I won't be long. So I canceled on Jenna. You promised to come home early. I gave up waiting for you at 3 a.m. I am pretty sure I smelled a woman's perfume when you came home. I never asked you about it, though. I knew better by then.

You are both looking at the menu. Then you order. You order. She is quiet. Are you ordering for both of you? Are you forcing her on a diet? She is already so thin.

"You are getting fat," you told me one day. It was two weeks after Christmas. Maybe I put on a few pounds, I was not fat, though. I promptly started counting calories. "Don't lose your boobs though," you said. "I need something to hold onto. You don't have much femininity on you, anyways. Running makes you look like a boy."

She has big boobs, I give her that. They might be fake. I don't think you would mind, though. A perfectly slender body with something round to grab onto. I can see her figure is flawless. I was never that perfect. Yet, I wonder. When will her fairytale break? Will you break her heart too?

The first time it happened, you were drunk. You came home late. I was already sleeping. I woke up to your body over mine. Let me sleep. But you were already pulling off my panties. Not now, let me sleep. You didn't stop. Please. Maybe in the morning, I need to sleep. You kept at it, though.

It didn't last long. You were drunk. You probably didn't remember. That was the lie I told myself. You are not like that. Until it became apparent that you were like that.

How long have you known her? Are you in love with her? Is she in love with you? Does she know about me? Is she the next me? Or can she be true love? Why do I care? Why am I jealous? Why is it so hard to break away?

I remember the smell of coffee each morning. "I made you a cup," and you placed it on my tiny nightstand before you kissed my forehead goodbye. Your love seemed endless. Sweet little texts throughout the day. A beautiful bouquet was delivered to my office on a random Wednesday. Showing up at my school unannounced to take me out for a coffee. Post-its with cheesy messages on the fridge. Putting a warm blanket over my shoulder. Someone finally cared about me.

All I wanted was to belong. To someone. To somewhere.

I never met my father. Mother says he bounced when she got pregnant. Mother was never around either. And when she was, she always had a new boyfriend with her. Then she married Ray, gave birth to Kimmie, and completely forgot about me. I buried myself in books and went for a run every time I felt the tears coming.

When I met you, I finally felt like I was home. Curling up together to watch a movie brought warmth. I wiped my tears when you handed me some ice for my bruise. "Baby, I'm sorry," you hugged me, and my body relaxed. I was willing to forget. I was loved. I told myself the same lie every time.

It took me another two years to leave. By that time, I had no friends. Not ones I could see, anyway. You never let me go out alone except to work. You checked my phone and tracked my steps. I stopped saying no and just let you do me. It was easier than being forced down.

You apologized, of course. In the beginning, at least. Then I stopped crying in front of you when you called me a fucking whore. I accepted my position. Until I didn't.

One day, I packed my bags and left. I banged on Jenna's door and broke down crying. "Sophie?" she was surprised. "What happened? I haven't seen you in years?" Somehow, she knew, though. Because friends know even if you can't tell them.

I never went back to get the rest of my stuff. I moved to Washington two weeks later. I got a job as a waitress and rented a small room near the university. I cried every night for six months. Then things slowly started to improve. I started a Ph.D. program, started running ultras, and got a puppy. I still can't think about dating, though.

I never returned. Until now. For Jenna's wedding. I didn't think I would see you. Philadelphia is so big. Yet here you are.

I should help her, I know. But what should I say? What could I say? She would never believe me.

Maybe you are different with her. Maybe she deserves better. That's a lie, of course. I know that you can't change.

But I can. I can stop watching you. I can decide to leave. Again. I stand up. I leave my empty coffee mug on my table and walk out of your haunting memory forever.



Left Unsaid

By: Dan Richardson

Graham is a man of habit. He wakes up at 5:10 every day. He looks at his phone for ten minutes before he gets up, then has a bowl of muesli. Graham leaves the house at 5:40 every day. He walks to the bus station, arriving at 5:47 exactly. He buys a newspaper, puts it into his briefcase, then enters the bus station toilet at 5:51.

Alan is a man of habit. His job at the bus station includes many small jobs, all of which are completed every day. He arrives at 5:00. He unlocks doors and turns on the lights and heat. He sweeps floors and empties the bins. At 5:50, he cleans the toilets.

Graham and Alan have been following this routine for many years. Sometimes, Alan is cleaning the sinks when Graham comes in; other days, he is replacing the urinal cakes. But every day, five days a week, Alan and Graham meet in the bus station toilets and exchange pleasantries.

“Morning, Alan,” says Graham one morning. “Horrible weather out there.”

“Hiya, Graham,” replies Alan, scrubbing at a stain on one of the cracked mirrors. “It’s not nice. I didn’t quite manage to avoid the rain on the way in.”

“Mmm. It’s meant to clear up later, though,” says Graham. “Still, a bit of rain didn’t hurt anyone.” *I got wet walking in. My trousers are soaking, and it feels horrible against my legs,* is what Graham doesn’t say.

“That’s right. Your skin’s waterproof, right?” answers Alan. *The rain got through my shoes this morning, and now my socks will stay wet all day,* he doesn’t say. “The 6:05 is delayed this morning, by the way,” Alan adds. “Engine trouble.” *I’m going to wipe the tables in the waiting room while you wait, so we can spend more time*

Dan Richardson has previously been published in *The Broken City*, *Antonym Magazine*, *Apple in the Dark*, *Corner Bar Magazine*, and *Typeslash Review*. He studied creative writing at Strathclyde University and lives on the Isle of Arran with his wife and dog.

together.

The tap rushes water, splashing onto Graham’s neatly-ironed shirt.

“More time to read the paper, then,” he says cheerfully. *I only get the paper to read the horoscopes and do Sudoku, anyway.*



Both men would describe themselves as, more or less, a typical man. Both live in square, sensible houses. Both are less than honest with themselves when counting calories. Both love their respective wives, yet only show emotion when their sports teams are winning or losing.

If you approached Alan or Graham, either at the bus station or elsewhere, and asked if they had any friends, neither of them would know what to say. Most likely, both would blink at you, laugh, then make a joke. ‘My wife talks enough for me,’ perhaps, or ‘I have friends—they’re called the TV remote and a cold beer.’ In truth, neither man has had a friend for many years. Graham’s last friend was a colleague at a previous workplace who stopped speaking to him when Graham forgot to invite him to his barbeque. Alan’s lack of friendship went back even further. His last school friend drifted away more than twenty years ago. ‘What do I need friends for? It’s only someone else who I need to buy a beer for at the pub,’ both might add with a pasted-on smile.



At 5:51, Graham enters the toilet. He weaves around

the 'wet floor' sign and approaches the urinal.

"Watch that floor, Graham," says Alan as he refills the paper towels. "It's just mopped."

Graham chuckles: "I dunno. If I break an arm, I don't have to go into work. That seems a price worth paying." *I actually enjoy my job, but I have been making that joke for six years.*

Alan smiles and asks: "How's work going? It's insurance you work in, isn't it?" *I know it's insurance. I am pretending that I don't care for reasons I can't explain even to myself.*

Above the urinal, Graham stares at the same erectile dysfunction advert he does every day.

"Yeah, insurance. Got a big project coming up. How are things coming along here? No news on those automated hand dryers?" *I have been secretly hoping they don't put in the hand dryers because the noise will make it harder to talk to you.*

Alan holds up the paper towels he is stuffing into the dispenser.

"What do you think? Of course not. You know what they're like." *I cancelled them because I didn't want the noise to drown out our conversation.*

Graham chuckles again, takes the wad of towels from Alan, and dries his hands. He is thorough, rubbing between each finger and moving his wedding ring to dry underneath.

"Management is the same everywhere, isn't it? Well, I'll see you tomorrow." *I want to stay, but I can't pretend to dry my hands anymore, and if I stay any longer, I would have to admit that I am here just for your company.*

Alan nods and wordlessly steps on the pedal bin for Graham to deposit the paper towels. *I finished cleaning the bathroom early today, but stayed in here just so I wouldn't miss you.*

The door swings shut behind Graham. Alan peels towels out of the overflowing dispensers.

he was cleaning just in time to see Graham enter, swinging his briefcase with gusto.

"It's Friday, Alan. At long last, it is Friday. Thank God for that."

"It may be Friday, but your bus is delayed again. Driver called in sick. Annoying when that happens; it throws the whole day." *One time, I seriously considered letting the air out of the bus tires to delay you, so you would be in the station for longer.*

Graham snorts. "Typical. I'd be more surprised if it was running on time." *I never told you I moved to a new workplace six months ago. It would be quicker for me to take the train, but then I would never see you again. "You have plans this weekend?"*

Alan dropped the toilet brush back into its holder and said: "The usual. Not being here." *It's my birthday tomorrow, and I'm having a party. I want to invite you, but I am scared you will say no.*

Graham took his spot at his favorite urinal and said: "That's all the plan you need. I'm going to lie on my couch, get drunk, and not see anyone for two days." *My wife has been suggesting I invite you to our barbecue for two months. I want to every day, but I lose the nerve each time you come into the bathroom.*

Graham finishes, washes his hands, and dries them. Alan leans against a cubicle, mop in hand. They don't say anything. The things left unsaid hang in the air between them. For a second, the two men stare at each other, groping blindly toward the courage they lack. Graham's watery blue eyes bore into Alan's dark brown eyes, and Alan looks right back.

Then Graham says, "Anyway, see you on Monday."

"See you then. Have a good weekend."

The door swings shut behind Graham. Alan dunks the mop into the soapy water.

5:51. Graham's jaunty whistle reaches Alan before the toilet door swings open. Alan backs out of the cubicle



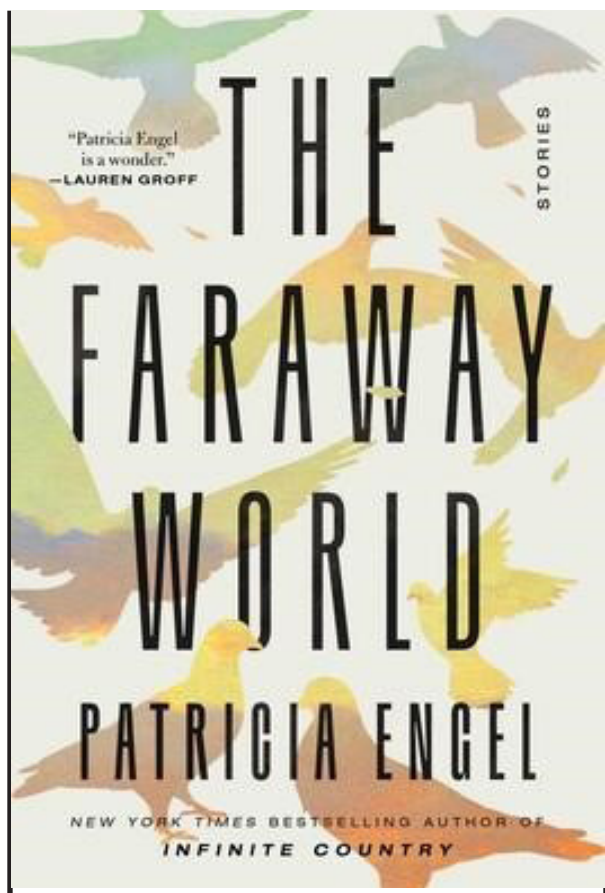


Book Reviews

Patricia Engel's Debut Collection Impresses and Enthralls

Title: *The Faraway World*
Author: Patricia Engel
Print Length: 224 pages
Publisher: Avid Reader Press
Pub Date: January 24, 2023

Rating: 4/5 Stars
Review by: Julia Romero



Patricia Engel's fifth publication and first foray into short stories is a well-done kaleidoscope of tales that highlights the intensity of desire, the beauty within ordinary acts of love, and the challenges of immigration. With flawed characters at the helm of her narratives, Engel forces us to stay present in the reality she shapes for us. We witness characters regret, grieve, doubt, and persevere—and while some stories end with a bang, others simply end, in the middle of a moment, as life so often does.

You're lucky if a story provides a handful of these moments of brevity, but I found myself constantly stunned by Engel's jaw-dropping heavy hitters.

From Colombia and New York to Cuba and Miami, Engel plucks her characters out of obscurity. A woman discovers her deceased brother's bones have been stolen from the cemetery at the same time that her first heartbreak returns home. A taxi driver decides to drive an earnest girl to every church in the city of Havana to fulfill a prayer she made to herself. Two Colombian women's paths intertwine in NYC when one hires the other as her live-in maid.

Among the ten stories in the collection, one stands out. In "The Book of Saints," a white man and a Colombian woman meet via an online match agency. Dual POV, we follow the couple as they go through major life changes—getting married, moving to the states, and having children. Although it would have been easy to make this story feel too expansive, Engel pulls out all the stops by keeping the relationship between the two characters the central focus, allowing them room to express, deflate, and transform—no small feat for an 18-page story. An element of Engel's writing style that I thoroughly enjoyed was her ability to wow the reader with gut-wrenching lines that force you to sit back in awe and reevaluate everything that's come before.

You're lucky if a story provides a handful of these moments of brevity, but I found myself constantly stunned by Engel's jaw-dropping heavy hitters.

While there were no stories I expressly disliked, I think the collection could have done with a bit more variety in both tone and characterization. The first story of the collection, “Aida,” was the most stylistically divergent, but the rest mostly blended together, making it clear that Engel feels comfortable sticking to a trademark style that unintentionally created tedious patterns. Also, small critique, but there were a few moments in which the tension was released too early, spoiling an otherwise well-developed, strong central plot point.

Overall, I’m glad that *The Faraway World* was my first introduction to Engel’s writing, and I’m eager to jump into her novels, where, I can only assume, her devilishly intoxicating characters take center stage.



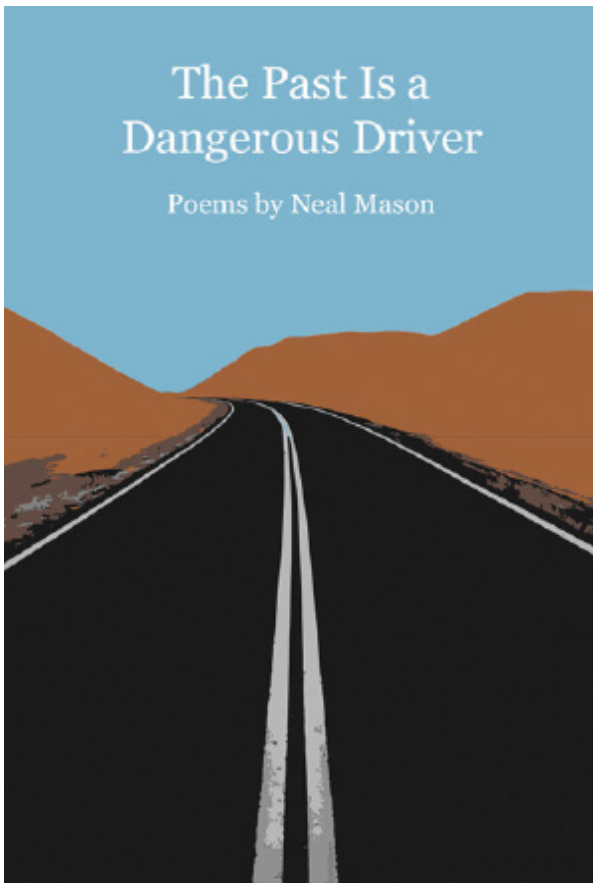
Patricia Engel is the author of *Infinite Country*, a New York Times bestseller and Reese’s Book Club selection; *The Veins of the Ocean*, winner of the Dayton Literary Peace Prize; *It’s Not Love, It’s Just Paris*, winner of the International Latino Book Award; and *Vida*, a finalist for the Pen/Hemingway and Young Lions Fiction Awards, New York Times Notable Book, and winner of Colombia’s national book award, the Premio Biblioteca de Narrativa Colombiana. She is a recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Born to Colombian parents and herself a dual citizen, Patricia is an associate professor of creative writing at the University of Miami.



Julia Romero recently graduated from New York University with a bachelor’s in English. She has a keen interest in speculative fiction that tests the limits of reality and offers new insights. She was a prose editor for *West 10th*, the NYU creative writing program’s undergraduate literary journal. She’s written about art, theatre, and music in *Encore Magazine*, and currently works as a publicity assistant at Wunderkind PR.

Can We Ever Really Escape the Past?

Title: *The Past is a Dangerous Driver* Rating: 4/5
Poet: Neil Mason Review by: Abigail Hebert
Print Length: 78 pages
Publisher: Holland Park Press
Pub Date: September 8, 2022



The collection *The Past is a Dangerous Driver* by Neil Mason is marked by a conversation between past and present. Artfully blending history with the poet’s ruminations on his life up to this point. These moments of history—both collective and personal—mingling with the current social and political landscape create an intense sense of nostalgia and sometimes even regret and self-doubt. This is not a collection for those unprepared to be taken on a revelatory journey, asking questions that are seldom answered, delving into what it means to be both haunted and impelled by the past.

Mason urges us to reflect on the proximity—the intermingling—of the truths of the past and those of the present and how they will eventually circle back around.

Mason drops readers into the crux of the collection with the first poem, “After Dunwich,” using imagery of a hesitant sea crashing onto an already crumbling shore; we are the poised church on the cliffside, awaiting change, awaiting the renaissance that comes with spring. The water and religious symbolism conjure rebirth, playing with the cyclical nature of life—Mason’s first real indication that the past will always come back around, for better or for worse. Directly following the hope of a “spring tide” comes the invocation of a graveyard as a metaphor for the sea: death quite literally knocking down the church’s doors, “a slow procession” overtakes the aisles. The flood eventually consumes everything, with “no intercessory cross” to save us, nor the speaker. Perhaps a bleak way to begin a collection, but there is no mistaking Mason’s intentions of elucidating our lack of control when it comes to the past and the future and their influence. We are left alone to reflect on how we handle these moments of reckoning and change.

“Derelict Classroom” feels like the aftermath of the first poem with a space completely overrun by nature, but the tone is lighter, as each instance of neglect or ruin is contrasted by one of growth and life:

Beyond the broken glass grow pampas

and canes; wind-punished nettles

sting empty air

while butterflies play games

Mason reiterates that nature prevails regardless of whether or not we’re prepared. Unrelentingly, it brings about change—or rebirth—while leaving in its path reminders of the past. This motif is called upon throughout the collection, but the scope expands with Mason introducing war, love, and inheritance as driving factors in the speaker’s life while he grapples with his older age and the future of his descendents.

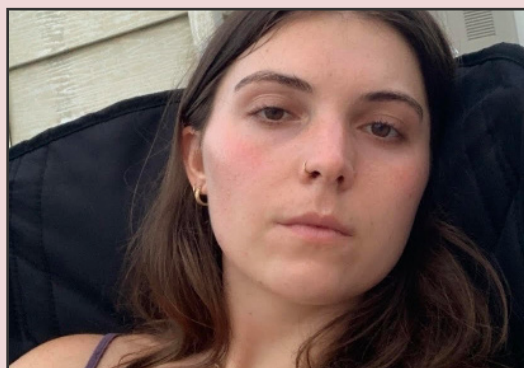
With the past as a pinning undercurrent, Mason takes to playing with form and cadence through the use of rhyme and alliteration. Perhaps reminiscent of the songs of soldiers used to maintain morale, or even of the great Grecian and Roman poets who often pondered their ancestry and how the fate of their lives was out of their hands. Mason’s bravery is evident in this vulnerable and empathetic collection, asking readers to sit with uncomfortable, unanswered questions. Yes, perhaps the past has corrupted the present, but maybe it also gives way to necessary evolutions and reflections.

The final poem, “Contiguity,” writhes with the anxiety of the present moment, using an active voice and time stamps to communicate the urgency: the speaker is “suddenly awake, eyes wide.” He is restless, trying to determine why he is ultimately alone and why his life has played out in this way. He looks to the past for answers, worried that what he lost is gone indefinitely. In this evocative ending, Mason urges us to reflect on the proximity—the intermingling—of the truths of the past and those of the present and how they will eventually circle back around.

The ellipses invite us to begin the collection again, steering us to reconsider and look deeper into our own evolutions, losses, and successes.



Neal Mason’s work was published in Peterloo Preview 2, Peterloo Poets, 1990. His first poetry collection, Excavations, was published by Peterloo Poets in 1991. His second collection, Leading the Guidebook Astray, was published by University of Salzburg Press in 1995. For six months, Neal was a Writer in Residence for the Arts Council in Welsh Valley. He tutored many courses for the University of Wales, WEA, Fairfield Arts Centre, and was awarded a bursary by the Arts Council. Neal was selected for a five-day masterclass at Hay-on-Wye Festival and advised the Arts Council’s Grants to Publishers Panel.



Abigail Hebert graduated from Vassar College where she participated in the Vassar Poetry Review and as an editor, poet, and reviewer. Originally from Arizona, she is now based in New York where she works as a foreign literary scout, writing poetry in her free time.



Poetry



"Please stop saying, 'We're not out of the woods yet.'"



"I read a lot of mysteries – I love a good whooodunit."

Andrew Armstrong won a regional poetry contest two years ago. His poems have gotten better since then. Andrew is also a cartoonist with over 100 sales.

October Morning in the Vercors

By: Shannon Huffman Polson

Shannon Huffman Polson writes about women, war, and the natural world. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Emerge Journal*, *Wrath Bearing Tree*, *War, Literature and the Arts*, *A Women's Anthology*, and *Sky Island Journal*. She lives with her family between Washington state and the Vercors Massif Region of France.

The horse chestnuts have fallen
broken open their spiny shells
laid naked their smooth fruit
and then turned a deep vermillion.
The leaves bright yellow
become light itself
with the early morning sun.
I can see my breath
and thin clouds
cling to the limestone cliffs.
How much time is left
like this?
A week, or maybe two?

and then the rain and wind will come
and then the snow and everything
becomes a secret
until spring.



To Prove Joy in Other Ways

By: John Grey

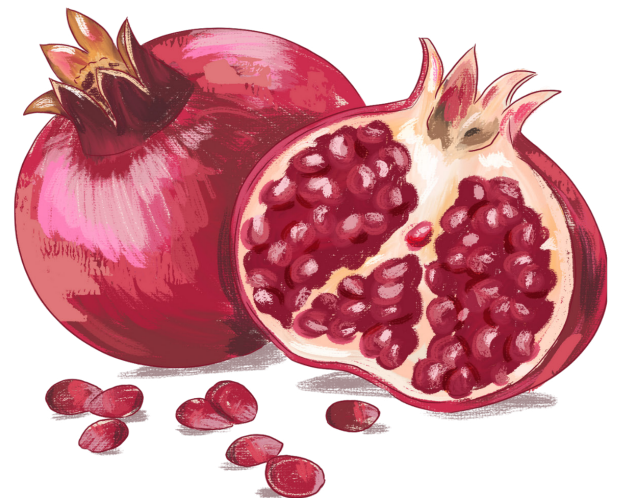
John Grey is an Australian poet and U.S. resident who was recently published in *Sheepshead Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and *Hollins Critic*. His latest books include *Leaves on Pages*, *Memory Outside the Head*, and *Guest Of Myself*, all of which are available through Amazon. John's work is upcoming in *Ellipsis*, *Blueline*, and *International Poetry Review*.

I number a handful of days
of great things richly formed,
and days, beyond account,
that are just like every other day.
So these days, I prove joy differently.
I appreciate how much it's stabilized.
No longer vexed,
but hesitant to say how
the measures of our life together,
these metaphysical ironies,
depend less on the flesh, bones,
whatever the grave deems obscure,
and more on what we internalize.

When I turned forty,
all of the ways of love seemed quaint.
Nothing to do with here and now.
Our touch no longer equal
to a good meal, a satisfying book.
It's not merely the aging of our hearts.
It's what we simply mean
when we say anything.

Once, solitude felt like fear.
Now, it bolsters me.
Thoughts take over,
apply a kind of subconscious grace.
No worry, I won't be leaving you.
Many are the factors in restraint.
Besides, the life together contrives
to eradicate all other possibilities.
No longer erratic, I'm defined,
have found a purpose in our chronology.

And the devotion has continued
even if the romance proved too frail to last.
Twenty years has it been?
I promised not to mention time at all
but as a classroom in which we've slowly learned
to value each other's breaths,
to speak a common tongue.
Once fierce, now tender moments,
love will come of what we are,
an unforced rhythm with its various human tones.



Two Poems

By: Dominic Windram

Dominic Windram has been writing poetry for over 20 years. His work has previously been published in a number of magazines, including *October Hill Magazine*. Also, he is a resident performance poet on PNN (Progressive News Network) and regularly contributes to a Catholic newspaper based in the Northeast of England.

Winter

Winter is the bones of a season.
The last remains of summer's green flesh
is flayed in its zero weather.
Winter represents a numbing quietude.
Even the roses after their brief moments
of glory are turned into curded pulp.
Winter's solemn hymns do not anticipate
the arrival of spring's vibrant songs.
O, how we long to hear them again!
Winter is the nemesis of time.
Its cruel frost works hard to contain
life's power and vitality.
For now, we must make do with death,
And the lengthening of shadows.



Advent: (2022)

The new winter poems I write
Are cloaked in frost and moonlight;
Not the frayed glitter and tinsel
Of these vain shadow festivals,
With their profound loss of meaning,
This age is quickly declining
Into nothingness. Full of sound
And fury it is indeed. O how
It praises itself and it's 'progress!'
Yet Advent, contains a stillness
And innocence that still moves me.
Its deep sense of humanity.
Listed in lexicons of hope,
That only humble hearts can know,
Defies current, elaborate schemes,
Systems and ways of glass and steel.
Small, tender truths somehow evade
Complex, machine-like minds. Some claim
That it's best to remain silent
About life's ultimate concerns.
Although perceived through modern eyes,
As obscure artifacts and signs,
There is a place for prayer, faith,
Sanctity. For this world still aches,
On tenebrous treadmills of days,
For fresh miracles of sweet Grace.
Advent for me, is like a frail light,
That seeps through cracks in rusted designs.



Saving Light

By: Ivanka Fear

Ivanka Fear is a Canadian writer. Her poems and stories appear in numerous publications, including *Blank Spaces*, *Montreal Writes*, *Orchards Poetry*, *October Hill Magazine*, *Mystery Tribune*, and elsewhere. Her debut novel is scheduled for release by Level Best Books in 2023.

I open the curtains to invite the morning
into the recesses of my darkened home,
flooding my world with colour.
Evergreen endures against baby blue,
lemon sun kisses emerald grass,
apricot leaves hug goldenrod.
But that's not what catches my eye.

Swarthy trunk stands strong,
barren branches wave goodbye
to dead offspring plucked from her arms
as they scurry away from she who gave them life,
bright and beautiful, taking flight.
Soon they, too, will be buried
as they enter the winter of their life.
The mother tree dressed in mourning,
laments the sprouts she nourished
and longingly awaits new buds to spring into existence.
But that's not the first thing I see.

An ashen form on silver lined road
stands guard, peering through the window
into the lost soul of the one left behind.
The watchman. The guardian. The sentinel.
Ice cubes run down my spine, frozen blood
seizes my cold heart, no longer beating.
The bogeyman has come to whisk my broken body away,
the grim reaper waits to collect my waning spirit,
a demon possesses my mind, rendering me mad.

But only for a moment. Then I recognize you.
The dawning brings enlightenment
on this, the first day of the last day
of daylight savings time.
Who will save me? Who will save my soul?
You. Stalwart, standing by, as usual. Watching over me.
Your shadow cast by the unexpected light,
on the capped chimney you bricked in this life.



The Gray Tree is Graced

By: Gerald Wagoner

Gerald Wagoner's childhood was divided between eastern Oregon and Montana where he was raised under the doctrine of benign neglect. Gerald is the author of *A Month of Someday* (Indolent Books, 2022), one poem published in *October Hill Magazine*, and *When Nothing Wild Remains* (Broadstone Books, 2023).

I shot a winter photo
of the Camperdown Elm.
It is in Prospect Park
near the lake,
beside the boathouse.
It's the one Marianne Moore
saved with a poem.
It was old then,
and thought dead.
It is twisty, short and gnarly.
Its two, heavy branches,
one suffering
a growing spiral fracture,
are supported
by hand carved
wooden crutches.
Leafless now,
enclosed by a good
wrought iron fence,
the gray tree is graced
by brown female cardinal
on a branches that
might be invisible,
if not for the scarlet
triangle of her beak.



The Gloom

By: Cameron Morse

Cameron Morse (he/him) is Senior Reviews editor at *Harbor Review* and the author of eight collections of poetry. His first collection, *Fall Risk*, won Glass Lyre Press's 2018 Best Book Award. His book of unrhymed sonnets, *Sonnetizer*, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books.

There is a gloom here
among my glial
cells, a blue glow to the cell
phone tented
under the blanket beside me
but at least I'm not alone. All
the rest aside, the edge
invites us
to step forward, look over.
It's a long way down
before we find ourselves
lying in the ravine.
Curled up asleep. Watching
over our bodies.



Storm

By: Andrew DeBella

Andrew DeBella is a Creative Writing teacher in Oklahoma. His work is featured in *Metaworker Lit Magazine* and *The Oddville Press*.

Part I

Black Skies
swallow words
Preborn

Black Skies
Throw fragmented light
into skulls
erupt cells in fire,
shovel oxygen
Like consciousness
Like soil

Part II

The trees kneel to it
Worship it, even
blind.
Irises whiten in the
encumbered weight,
The splintered edifice, the fractured glass

hands are obstructed,
Disjointed—
Fingers that
unpacked boxes, again,
carried ancient texts,
Held lightning
That blistered
calluses deeper
than veins;

Part III

The rain filled me, again
its container took shape
In my bones—
it simply
Asked a question
Answered with
another question
Another,
Still
Another
One more
Question, please.



Knew Art

By: Robert Best

Robert Best is the author of five investment books and one spiritual travelogue, as yet unpublished. In March, 2023, his new poetry collection, *Into the Wolf*, will be published in the U.K. by Iron Press.

Handprints, older than the pyramids, adorning rock walls in caves and on cliffs, delicately painted in charcoal and ochre by the rough, hairy hands of our oldest upright ancestors, or stencilled in vermilion cinnabar dust, blown over, around and past an *actual hand* by musky-sweet breath to stick to the stone for a dozen millennia. On an exposed cliff face, they signal *Stop! Go no further! The jinn of this place welcome you not.* At the entrance to the cave, though, they wave and beckon, reach out to take hold of my strange, strange clothes and lead me inwards to the cool and to the gloom, to a low, low murmur seeping softly from the fissures. Mesmerised, drawn deeper, ever further, until suddenly, startlingly, deep within the subterranean labyrinth, more prints appear, by the light of electricity and reason, scaring me, admonishing me, silently berating me for penetrating too far into the Sacred Mountain, into the Goddess, into the Dream. Back. *Go back. You are like a child.* Back, finally, at the gaping mouth of the cave—the extravagant window onto the wall-less vastness of the outside world—I finally find a perfect pair of ochre-blown handprints among the hundreds that are gathered, ready, or so I thought, to bid me farewell. These hands knew ice, intimately; knew fire, intimately; knew fear and love, intimately; knew the jinn, intimately; these are hands that knew art. I place my own, blood-warm hands tentatively upon them, and they immediately sink up to the wrists in the suddenly softening stone, while a voice far, far away in time and yet so close I can smell her musky-sweet breath, whispers, “*Anchor yourself.*”



Snow Day

By: Anne Mikusinski

Anne Mikusinski has been writing poetry and short stories since she was seven years old and most probably making them up long before she could hold a pen or pencil in her hand. Anne finds inspiration in music and art, and sometimes even the little things that happen every day.

Something about
Listening to Jubilee Street
On a grey Sunday morning
When all I want to do is stay
Inside
But obligations draw me out
To brave the elements
Reminds me of
Time passed
And all things unrequited
And unfinished.

Especially when the violin chimes in
Weaving its counterpoint among the
Words
Of a story
Containing too much regret.



Harkening

By: Michael Estabrook

Michael Estabrook has been publishing his poetry in the small press since the 1980s. He has published over 20 collections, a recent one being *Controlling Chaos: A Hybrid Poem* (Atmosphere Press, 2022). He lives in Acton, Massachusetts.

... is he living in the past
he wonders
when life was simpler?

As the present continues sliding into a more and more
uncertain and dangerous—
let's be honest and say foreboding—future
I find myself harkening back (harkening? seriously?)
to a more comfortable past—

where I'm dating my girl picking her up in my new
1966 Bahama Blue VW Beetle
taking her bowling, to the movies
dancing with her in the high school gym

where my brother and I are working at The Doc's
caring for all those animals

where I'm a star on the gymnastics team
lifting weights with Tony and Ed

where the future is stretching out before me
like an exciting, mysterious road
of possibility and wonder
and I have all the time in the world.



A Lesson in Rhubarb



By: Will Penn

Will Penn lives in Dublin with two cats where he writes food poetry. His work has been described as “I didn’t get the bit about the trees” by his father and has been published in his quarterly Instagram stories.

The ground brings food and the leaves cast shade.
The bushes once fielded games, lost to a tilling, churned to a growth.
This is the cycle in which all is made.

Granny’s hands, with their gnarl and craze,
Felt the stems and showed roots to where the air is plenty.
The ground brought food and the leaves cast shade.

Those knotted joints groaned and pointed so as to aid
Me to guide the instant of meditative blade.
This is the turning cycle in we are made.

“This is a lesson in rhubarb” that I picked, she stewed and we ate -
Merely kitchen vapors and a flash of spoons. Still,
The ground brings food and the leaves cast shade.

Now, the proof of the eating is a goodbye bade
To a fleeting citrus under weight of heavy crumble.
This is the cycle in which it was made

To be renewed again by a grass and shade to stew the age
Of trees who, in wither and weather-beat, sway all the same
And reach, with arthritic wood, to say
“This is the cycle in which all is made.”



On Seeing an Old, Old Friend as One Plague Ebbs and Another Progresses

By: Nolo Segundo

Nolo Segundo, pen name of L.J. Carber, became published in his eighth decade in over 120 literary journals in 11 countries and three book length collections: *The Economy of Existence* (2020), *Of Ether and Earth* (2021), and *Soul Songs* (2022). He's been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

He came to the restaurant with his 36-year-old daughter who I said looked radiant in her first-time pregnancy.

We were eating outside that rare summer day that smelled more of heaven than earth and my wife and I had got there first... so I had prepared myself for meeting my friend of half a century after almost two years and two major operations on his part (a triple by-pass and prostate cancer as he neared the ninth decade—I almost wondered if he was showing off, a Superman of old age).

Still, my heart creaked a bit when I saw old Gus and young Kate coming to our table: he was smaller, slower, less exact in stature and speaking and I had to strain to hear him even though he sat close to me but none of that mattered for a miracle happened—the subtle but resolute miracle found in the bones of liking, the bones of friendship and the unbreakable bones of love

as all those months since two old men last hugged had vanished as though we had dreamt that lost time and now we were once again awake...



Gissel Gomez is an artist and a first-year student at Williams College. She has been drawing all her life. Her artwork can be found in the *Blue Marble Review*, *Last Leaves Magazine*, and *Half Empty Magazine*.



Two Poems

By: Eugene Stevenson

Eugene Stevenson, son of immigrants, father of expatriates, lives in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. Author of *The Population of Dreams* (Finishing Line Press 2022), his poems have appeared in *The Hudson Review*, *Red Ogre Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *Washington Square Review*, among others.

Lost Everything

Lost everything,
Tony Imo did,
to find himself,
amidst howls in
empty rooms.
Just one face,
his face, in the
mirror, with an
old man's body,
flaccid, tired,
in the bed.

Lost for words,
he rolls glib phrases
off the tongue,
mulls psychopop
after dinner for one.
Not a permanent
condition, he
decides. Only
seems that way
when the truth
squirms out.

Far Away As a Long Walk

With an early morning phone call,
life of the day escapes skyward to
join spirits of passing automobiles,
their backs & mine turned on hours,
speed, direction, conversation.

Yellow sign, curve in road, south past
leafless trees across the Illinois prairie,
far away as a long walk, when, while
you are gone, I move to the city to
pass evenings listening to my breath.

Too many years on the damned bus,
carpools, chauffeuring each other,
I become a pedestrian again, amid
new architecture, with old photos in
the crowd, like lives of days gone by.



Two Poems

By: Richard Dinges, Jr.

Richard Dinges, Jr. lives and works by a pond among trees and grassland, along with his wife, two dogs, three cats, and nine chickens. *Hurricane Review*, *Big Windows Review*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Pennine Ink*, and *Courtship of the Winds* most recently accepted his poems for their publications.

Too Hot

Too hot, I watch clouds
fade gray, patch worn
denim sky and my own
patched knees, melt me
in sky's open mold. Sun's
relentless dance blanches
us all too hot. I swallow
words carved across
my dry tongue, too dry
to say more. Fists clenched
in pockets frayed around
holes in holes, statues
topple, feet trample
their broken dust. Somewhere
new statues cool in molds
to be raised again under
sun's unyielding stare.

Tree on Horizon

Orange swathed horizon
fades into violet.
Darkness speckled
with faint stars,
bits of violence
laden with calm,
hovers above a hard
line where we begin,
or end. Shadows
deepen below
a horizon broken
by a bare branched
tree, limbs spread
in quiet benediction,
or a final threat, or
a simple gesture
of confusion.



Life Between McDaniel's Bar and The Lord's House

By: Kate Wylie

Kate Wylie (she/they) is a poetry MFA candidate at Pacific University and 2018 Webster University alum. Kate reads fiction for *The New Southern Fugitives*, regularly contributes to the Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome society magazine *Loose Connections*, and has published work in various literary magazines including *Canary*, *The Racket*, and *Sport Literate*.

Watchful signs stand stark against the day
announcing children at play. The street's
gone silent; they've all grown and gone.

Henrietta lives in a quiet house
surrounded by pines. Inside there are rooms
full of dolls, wall-to-wall cradles and dress
collections, miniature jewels and bottles of perfume.
She tosses leftovers out for the neighborhood cats
wandering in winter. White-washed wood fences
splinter against the cold.

Henrietta dusts down each tiny girl, their eyes
shining from behind a secure glass world. She wants
to disappear, to roll like an airplane bottle
in the street, the sewer, to back out of this world.
She wants to vanish into the wide mouths
of trash bins lining the street.

Henrietta sits on the front porch, under
plastic icicles dangling from overrun gutters,
watches shopping carts lay abandoned
alongside bright traffic cones in freezing yards;
the wheels of a rusted pink tricycle spin in slow wind.
The tire swing rope goes on fraying while graveyards whisper
their condolences from opposite sides of the street.

Mother Mary stands guard in the front yard,
her teardrops falling into open palms.



Release

By: Robert Beveridge

Robert Beveridge makes noise and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent and upcoming appearances in *Cattails*, *Ellipsis...*, and *Ample Remains*, among others.

They decided
he was cured
as long as he took
his pills every day

they let him
out of the hospital
into the freedom
of no job no money
no love

and once the pills
ran out no meds

so he fled
to the comfort
of his world, carved
out his niche
at the intersection
of Fifth and Market
and has been there
ever since



Sharp, Dead, and Growing.

By: Oladejo Abdullah Feranmi

Oladejo Abdullah Feranmi is a poet, writer, and veterinary medicine student from Ibadan, Nigeria. A Haikuist, he reads submissions at *SeaGlass Literary* magazine and edits for the *Incognito Press*. His works are published in *Gone Lawn*, *Brave Voices Magazine*, *The Lumiere Review*, and more.

I was sitting by the door page of a newspaper trying to walk past
without getting massacred. The paper is another publication
growing some country into flowers and buds and rooted
hurricane messages. When the sky was autumn enough, we nest wings
from petals and taper our bosoms to suffer a burning throat.
This gut, an aerodrome every word plane flew out burning.
Some days, I'm a pilot with heavy stares at the clouds, and everything
that knew falling got drenched. I wasn't wet, I was the rain.
My finger bones subsiding into bombs aimed to do better.
The next time you plant something, make sure it's a star that fell
onto gazettes filled with wish articles that will let the grounds be
and grow happily ever after in the blossoms of spring.



Easter Courses

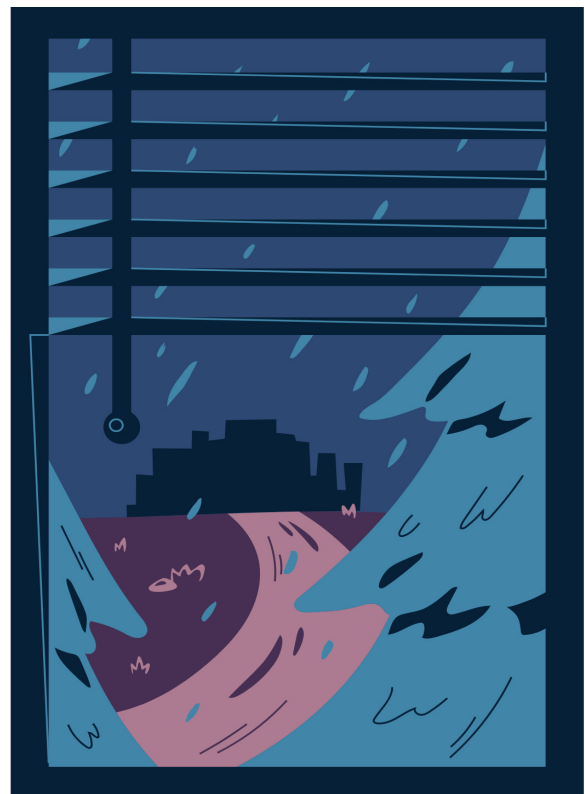
By: Robert Nisbet

Robert Nisbet is a Welsh poet, a now-retired high school English teacher, and college lecturer, who wrote short stories for 40 years (with seven collections) and has now turned to poetry, being published widely in both Britain and the USA. He is a four-time Pushcart nominee.

He contemplates the motorway services.
Often they've oppressed him, like underworld scenes,
but today he just remarks the slow stir of tedium,
waits for the friend who will drive him to the West.
Much of the journey will soften his melancholy,
Cheltenham's grace, the way the road from Ross
on into Wales climbs above the River Wye,
remembered things as yet unblurred.

In the campus seminars in the Welsh coast town,
he will blaze, articulate an anger with injustice
(for politics and lecturing are what he does)
and this is good, it's decent, what he says is meant
and in such blaze the sadness cannot settle.

On the Sunday mornings, on the Easter courses,
he'll take the cable car up Constitution Hill,
walk in the brightness of the gorse and hedgerows,
a landscape which reminds and reassures
and, in some small part, redeems.



Wishing I Were Here

By: Robert Feldman

Robert Feldman is inspired by iconic members of his hometown Paterson's literary tradition, most notably Allen/Louis Ginsberg and William Carlos Williams. Robert continues writing, publishing, and presenting his work (including *Hineni*, 2018; *Sunflowers, Sutras, Wheatfields* and other ArtPoems, 2019) while he makes fire paintings and plays tabla.

by the position of the stars
at the junction of heaven and earth,
resolutely they stand
pondering the hardships preceding this great banquet of life,
where the perfumed air and sweet fruits now have become their feast
as it will be for the subsequent souls,
who, like us,
will have traveled through our destined times,
who hope like those before to leave the wheel to find the hub,
who turn the lights off in the city to see,
whose forbearers expanded from both knowledge and suffering,
selflessly shouldering the center tent pole all through the night
keeping it from collapsing while the others slept,
and, who like us,
must learn
that by saving just one soul
someday saves the whole world



Ekphrastic for a Missing Masterpiece

By: Pamela Wax

Pamela Wax is the author of *Walking the Labyrinth* (Main Street Rag, 2022) and the forthcoming chapbook *Starter Mothers* (Finishing Line Press). Her poems have received several awards and a Best of the Net nomination. She is an ordained rabbi living in the Northern Berkshires of Massachusetts.

The sun melts all of Moscow down [...] this uniformity of red.
— Vasily Kandinsky

I closed my eyes on a full
sun day, the kind of day
a smart person wears
sunscreen and shades
when facing a solar deity
straight on. A blood red canvas
scrolled behind my eyelids,
splashed kaleidoscopic,
phosphenes midnight blue
and lime, glints of electric yellow.

I recognized that painting,
could now skip
the Kandinsky retrospective
at the Guggenheim, save
the price of admission.
Just sunbathe.

Later, I scoured my art
books, the Internet, sure
he'd perched outside
his dacha, the sky, blazing,
a Moscow masterpiece
on the easel behind his
eyes—the same one
I hallucinated in technicolor,
the one nowhere to be found
in his oeuvre, the one
I'm left to imagine in his stead.



Life in the Cracks

By: Arvilla Fee

Arvilla Fee teaches English Composition for Clark State College and has been published in numerous presses. What she loves most about writing is its energy and passion. For Arvilla, poetry has always been about being in the trenches with ordinary people who will say, “She gets me.”

well-tended gardens,
acres of blooms placed just-so,
aesthetically pleasing;

someone paid big money to
imitate nature’s bounty of goods,
blending colors, shapes...

like any designer worth
his salt—people will pause, snap
pictures, oohing, ahing—

but here I crouch,
at a crack in the sidewalk, lens
focused on a single yellow

bloom; some call it
a weed; I call it tenacity, nature’s
rebellion against the confines

of man.



Existential Snowfall

By: Renee Cronley

Renee Cronley is a writer and nurse from Manitoba. She studied Psychology and English at Brandon University and Nursing at Assiniboine Community College. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Chestnut Review*, *PRISM International*, *Off Topic Publishing*, *Love Letters to Poe*, and several other anthologies and literary magazines.

It's the first snowfall of the year.

He sets his fire engine on the stand
with his nightlight and fisher-price radio
and presses his tiny face against the window,
desperate to go out and make the world his own.

A diamond chandelier falls from the sky
and breaks into a billion pieces.

He ventures into the sparkling white scene
that sets the stage for great feats of imagination.

He's the star of the Ice Capades,
skating over small patches of ice in winter boots.

He's a brilliant engineer
designing grand snow forts.

He's a brave soldier
defending his country with snowballs.

He's a fire-breathing dragon
marveling at the illusionary clouds of smoke
when warm breath and cold air meet.

He rubs his nose raw against wool mittens,
thaws his frozen eyelashes by scrunching his eyes,
and continues his epic adventures
in a heavy snowsuit with damp socks—
a small price to pay to spend the day
thriving in a winter wonderland
until his mother calls him inside.

And until time retires the imagination,
when age and responsibility
frosts the glass between childhood and adulthood.

It's the first snowfall of the year.

He sets his walker beside the stand
with his touch lamp and one button radio
and presses his time-worn face against the window,
remembering when he made the world his own.



The Old Tree

By: Carolina Worrell

A New York City native, Carolina Worrell has a journalism background and has been writing and editing for 15 years for a myriad of publications. Her work is featured in both technical and lifestyle magazines, and, in 2015, her story was featured in *The New York Times*' "Metropolitan Diary."

I watched the old tree from across the way.
I listened to its heartbeat; I watched its branches sway.

I wrapped my arms around its bark and listened to its tales.
Of those who came before me; of those who thought they failed. Of those yet to be remembered; of those whose ties have been severed.

Each new season's bloom brings the stories of my youth. Searching for the answers, returning to the truth.

Of who I am. Of who I was.

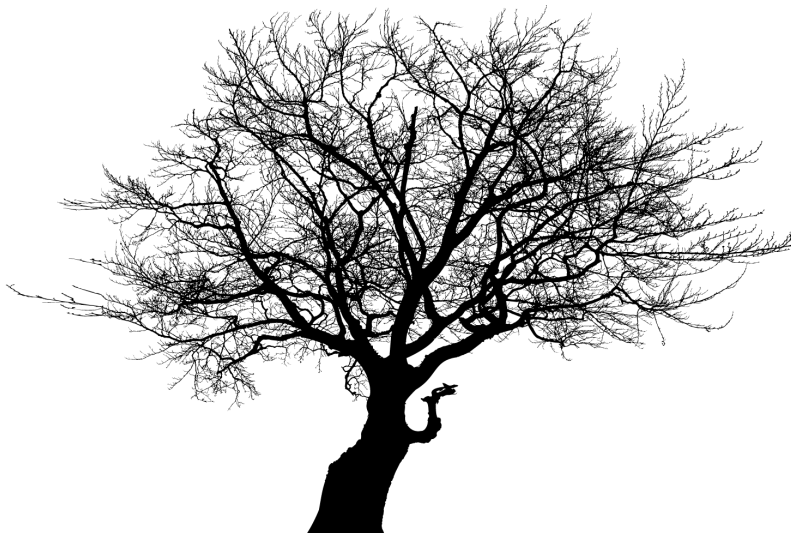
Stories from my ancestors.

One early autumn morning, I heard weeping from that old tree. It dug its roots down deep and it called out to me.

It stretched its branches tall.

"Don't go," I heard the wind-swept leaves say. "You belong here, too," echoed the snapping twigs on that blustery fall day.

You can't rewrite the past, but you can certainly live a life that will make an impact.



A Day in December

By: Ted Millar

Ted Millar teaches English at Mahopac High School. His work has appeared, or will appear, in *Grand Little Things*, *Words and Whispers*, *Fleas on the Dog*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Straight Forward Poetry*, and others. He was among 65 poets to have work accepted for the 2018 Arts Mid-Hudson exhibit Artists Respond to Poetry.

Like most six year olds, I had no idea
what was going on in the world. It seemed like
just another December evening: our Christmas
tree in its usual corner; my mother scraping
dinner together after her shift at the nursing home;
the calendar's ex'd off days until Santa's arrival.

When I asked why the lady in the fur coat
on TV was crying , my father, still in slacks
and buttoned shirt, scowled at the 5:00 news,
and mumbled, "Someone died."

Exactly thirteen years later, returning
from class to a dorm room dark as a cave,
"Imagine" floating from his stereo speakers,
my roommate asks, gruff and aggrieved,
if I remembered it was the date
John Lennon had been shot.

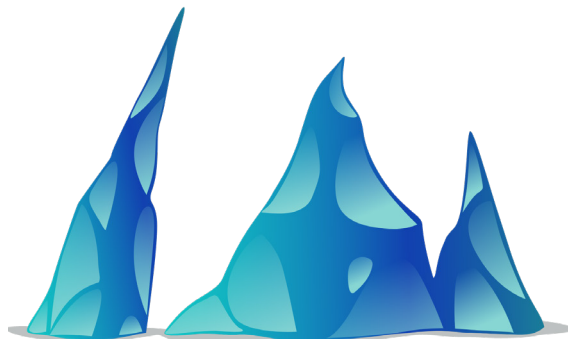


The Home We Build, the Price We Pay

By: Surina Jain

Surina Jain is an editor, copyeditor, and proofreader. She has been writing for over 18 years. *Echoes from the Inner World* (2012) was her first anthology. Her poems have been featured in *Dovetail*, NYU's Art and Literary magazine.

We travel across the oceans
To an altogether different continent
Far far away from what we call home
For freedom and "life"
For studies and careers
To grow and build another "home"
But I often ask myself, "Is it actually home?"
It is when I want to run away from responsibilities
It is when I want to get away from my dysfunctional family's chaos
(Makes it easier to shut it all behind me)
It definitely is when I think about relationships and friendships and love that once meant everything but is now in ruins and I'm afraid to even remember the good times
Whom are we kidding but our very own selves!
Having traveled across the oceans
I missed uncountable meals and conversations with mom and dad at the dinner table
I missed accompanying my dad for his evening tennis
I even missed sitting by his side when he was breathing his last . . .
I will never get to say the missed goodbyes.
I miss seeing my grandma go from old to older
I miss gossips and laughter, and sometimes the very chaos I have run away from
I never got to become my best friend's bridesmaid at her wedding
I'm missing dancing at my only-brother's sangeet and pulling his leg at every little gesture
I have missed, and am missing, so many tiny moments that add up to make life
And in between all that I have missed and the life that I have built
Having traveled so far away, across the oceans
I often ask myself—
What is this life?





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